

A WOMAN'S RANSOM

BY THE
AUTHOR OF "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY"



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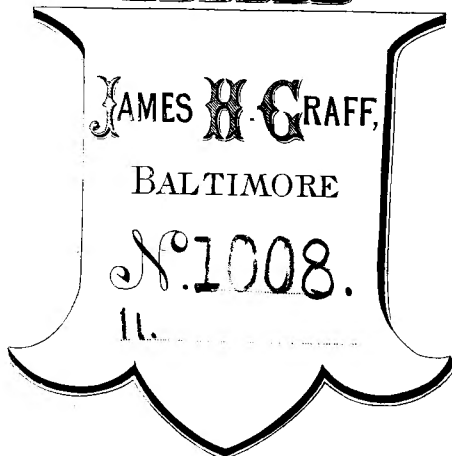
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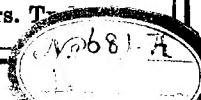
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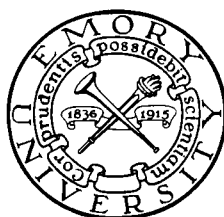


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A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON.

AUTHOR OF "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "HOUSE OF ELMORE,"

"WILDFLOWER," "SLAVES OF THE RING," ETC.

"Who sows the serpent's teeth, let him not hope
To reap a joyous harvest. Every crime
Has, in the moment of its perpetration,
Its own avenging angel."

SCHILLER.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY
1866.

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BOOK I.

STILL LIFE.

“Where is it strong, but nere the ground and rocte;
Where is it weake, but on the highest sprayes;
Where may a man so surely set his foote,
But on those bowes that groweth lowe alwayes;
The little twygs are but unstedfast stayeres.”

A MYRROUR FOR MAGISTRATES.

“Arithmetic
Was the sole science he was ever taught;
The multiplication table was his Creed,
His Pater-noster and his Decalogue.”

SOUTHEY.

A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

CHAPTER I.

CANUTE'S LUCK.

WE were all at home when the good news came. We had waited for it for a long while; we had built castles in the air concerning it; we had experienced that heart-sickness which is the necessary concomitant of hope deferred; we had given it up for lost, and had turned to the old matter-of-fact, up-hill work, as though no chance in our favour were ever likely to recur again. Possibly it would be fairer to say that *I* had waited and suffered from heart-sickness; that *I* had given up the hope of good news, and had stuck to the plans and measurements with that dogged persistency for which those who have bread to earn are remarkable—that *I* had been troubled at first by the hope, and ossified, just a little when that hope went farther and farther away, and left me at the old desk in the old surveyor's office, wherein I had worked, off and on, for eleven years.

That is the fairer way of putting it, for my good mother and Ellen had not harrassed themselves about the matter three days after the plans had been fastened up and forwarded to Nettlewood. They had thought them very elaborate, and that I had been a little too extravagant in the mounting of them—considering my usual luck—that the general view was a pretty landscape, and that the expenses of transit were rather formidable; and then the curtain dropped over the last “foolish idea,” and there was an end of it for ever and aye!

In plain truth, they forgot all about it. Six months afterwards, when I, by chance, expressed my surprise that no notice had been taken of the plans, and that to my letter requesting their return, no answer had been forwarded me, my mother had looked up dreamily,

and said, "What plans, Canute?" with that dear old forgetfulness of past disappointments which has made her life a contented one, at least. I remember that I was a little mortified at the time, and did not make sufficient allowance for my mother's business abstractions, and my sister Ellen's life of oscillation between Kennington Road and the house wherein she played the part of daily governess.

Besides, had I not been designing plans all my life?—going in for competitive mansions, hospitals, town-halls, and workhouses, with a faith in my own ability, and a confidence in the fairness of my judges, remarkable to witness, after eight years of disappointments. Had not "Canute's luck" become a by-word with Ellen and my mother, between brother Joseph and his wife, even between the two apprentices at the office where I worked, and earned my forty shillings a week when business was brisk?

And then, all of a sudden, the luck came! Waiting for it so long had not soured my temper, or made me dissatisfied with the world, at least. I can assert that as honestly and proudly now as I did on the memorable night which changed the current of my life. My sister Ellen brought the news. All letters on the subject of those plans were to be forwarded to C. G., 118, Newton Street, City. That was my elder brother's place of business—had been *our* place of business once upon a time; but more of that matter anon, when there is less in the way of the story's progress.

Ellen Gear brought the letter late one evening in the end of June, when mother and I were at home, as aforesaid. She came in with a flushed face, and her dark eyes quite aflame with delight.

"Here's good news for my dear old Canute at last!" she cried, running into the parlour wherein mother and I were playing our usual game at cribbage—five card cribbage—every night in the year—Sundays excepted—and flinging the letter in the midst of my "flush," which I had triumphantly displayed on the table.

"Good news, Ellen, my dear," exclaimed my mother, settling her spectacles on more firmly, "gracious me now, whatever makes you think of such a thing!"

She laid her cards down with the ~~faces~~ uppermost—she had not a hole in her hand that deal! I took up the letter, and Ellen leaned over me, with her hand on my shoulder, looking at the superscription.

"C. G. 118, Newton Street, City," she cried aloud; "what does it mean, Canute? Joseph could not make it out," she added, "and would have sent it away again, had I not snatched it from the post-man's hands and said, 'I was sure it was all right.'"

"You remembered all about it, my girl," I replied.

"A little of it," said Ellen, hesitating; "that twelve months ago you asked Joseph to take in any letters addressed to C. G. at his house. Don't you remember laughing, and almost making him laugh too, when you said that a change of address might bring a change of luck?"

I remembered all that, with the exception of Joseph's approximation to a laugh—I had never seen him laugh in my life. The world was too serious and intent a study with him to glean amusement from. A hundred times already I had told him so, and begged him not to think too deeply. It kept my mother anxious concerning him sometimes.

"And this is the luck, is it?" I said; "well, let us hope so."

"My dear Canute, what does it all mean?" inquired my bewildered mother.

"It's the answer about the Nettlewood plans—the mansion that was to be built, and the premium of two hundred and fifty pounds that was offered in *The Builder* for the best design. Why, you haven't forgotten all about *that*?" I exclaimed a little testily.

The fragment of the old story came back at the adjuration. From the misty depths into which it had receded emerged a faint idea of my last study, my long hours over-time last year, and the mother's fears that I was ruining my health by working too hard. She remembered the plans, not so much for the style of them, as for the anxiety that they had caused her. Over and over again had she stolen to my side, and begged me to put the drawings away for *that* night—I was getting pale and thin, and surely there was no necessity to work so hard!

"Nettlewood in Cumberland, to be sure. I remember all about it now."

"And the good news may be to apprise you that the plans are awaiting your order, and will be forwarded when the expense of carriage is transmitted to those who have detained them so long," said Ellen.

"Now, Nellie dear, that is the unkindest cut of all!" I ejaculated.

Her arms were round my neck and her lips were on my cheek the moment afterwards. I had spoken jestingly, but she had seen where the arrow had struck. God bless her! she was always a quick girl.

"Forgive me, Can," she cried, "but I thought you might be building too much on good news—and that the disappointment would be felt the more acutely when the few curt lines of dismissal met your eyes. You're not angry with my caution?"

"I, my girl! is it likely?"

"Was he ever angry in his life, Nellie?" asked my mother.

"I can't remember. I don't think he ever was."

Then there followed a hearty laugh at my expense—as though a good temper, or an easy disposition, were something worth laughing at, under the circumstances. And whilst they were laughing, I broke the seal and decided for myself whether the news were good or bad. Decided!

There was a sudden pause—two pair of women's eyes were upon me, focussing me at the table—me, a pale-faced, light-haired young man, of an old-fashioned turn. Eight and twenty years of age, and looking more like eight and thirty—I could have wagered my head.

Stoically and philosophically I read the contents of the letter, and suffered not a reflex of the news to be guessed by the expression on the face which two women were anxiously watching. I prided myself on my composure—an actor trained to the business could not have done it better.

"Now guess," I said.

"Bad news!" they exclaimed; my sister Ellen adding, "I am so sorry," as though she had been the unfortunate means of raising my expectations to an unwarrantable height.

Then I could hold out no longer, and bang came my hand on the table with a suddenness that brought their hearts into their throats, and frightened my mother's spectacles off her nose.

"It's good news, upon my soul!"

I can scarcely make out what possessed me that night, my excitement was so unusual, and so unlike me. They thought that I was going out of my mind, I verily believe. It was the first piece of luck that had fallen to my share since I had been born—it changed me on the instant.

"It's good news, you nervous, evil-foreboding pair of women!" I shouted; "it's the stroke of fortune that comes to each man once in life—the tide in the affairs of men—good news!—hurrah!"

Slap came the palm of my hand on the table again—Nellie caught at the table lamp and saved the glass shade from shivering into a hundred pieces—my mother burst out crying, and wrung her mitted hands piteously.

"He's going mad!—the poor dear boy is going mad!"

Ellen Gear looked paler than ever, but she still had confidence in me. If I had varied from my usual manner, was not this an unusual incident? And were my actions to be ever measured by the square and rule?

"I shall be better in a minute," I said, loosening my neckerchief, "it's all oozing out of my finger-ends by degrees. There, I'm a sober man again, grave as a judge when he puts on the black cap."

"What an awful comparison!" cried my mother.

"Dry your eyes, mother, and pick up your spectacles," I advised, "I am going to propose a vote of thanks to Ellen Gear, Esquires, for the candid and handsome manner in which she has brought this news to us."

"But why don't you tell us what the news is, Can?" cried my sister.

"Re—re—read the letter," sobbed my mother. I had been brandishing the epistle in my left hand all the while, flourishing it round and round my head like a squib on Guy Fawkes night—the suggestion of my mother reminded me of the proper method of communication.

"I'll read the letter!"

I felt a little husky over it; my voice had some difficulty in dodg-

ing a great lump that had taken up a central position in my throat, but considering all things, the reading was got over pretty well.

Nettlewood House, June 25th, 18—.

"Mrs. Mary Zitman presents her compliments to C. G., and begs to inform him that having carefully considered and studied the various plans forwarded to Nettlewood, for competition early in the preceding year, she has adjudged the prize for originality of design, and skill in execution, to the drawings he was good enough to send. Having resolved to commence the building without delay, she would be glad to have an interview with C. G., at Nettlewood, previous to placing the work under his sole superintendence. A few lines, stating the real name and address of C. G., and mentioning the day and hour on which he may be expected, will oblige."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated my mother.

"There is no cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds enclosed, I suppose?" asked Ellen, timidly.

"What a memory you have, girl, *now!*" I cried; "you even remember the amount of premium. No,—no cheque just at present."

I shook the letter in my hand, but no *douceur* of earnest intentions fluttered forth from its folds.

"If it should be a practical joke, Canute, dear, after all," suggested my mother, still doubtful if good fortune could possibly fall to my share.

"Oh! it's all right enough, mother—the cheque will follow in due course, or be presented to me at Nettlewood," I replied; "but that's only a chip from the corner-stone of my good fortune, you know."

"Only a chip—two hundred and fifty pounds only a chip! Do listen to him, please!"

"Did you not hear that I was to superintend the erection of the building; and there's a handsome salary attached thereto, of course—fair work for some time, at a fair price. It's all like sunshine after many years of gloom. This is not the usual luck you have all been accustomed to smile at."

"If it's not too good to be true, what a change, Canute!" said mother; "and, oh! dear," putting her hand to her heart, as though a sudden spasm had shot there, "what a long way it will take you from us all, breaking up, perhaps, the little home for good."

"Never for good, whilst the dear mother and sister live. This, or something like this, will be the home. I shall come to London very often to take my old place here, and play cribbage with you, or play my hand and the old dummy's against Ellen and yours. We'll have no breaking up of homes again!"

"There's a dear boy!" said my mother, taking my words for Gospel truth on the instant. If I said there should be no home-

wreck, she would believe me, as though I had a superhuman power to shield her and her daughter from danger. After that the congratulations set in. My mother pressed me in her arms and had a good cry—all to herself—on my shoulder; Ellen, as she kissed me, murmured that she knew good fortune would reward my patience some day. Her great dark eyes were worlds of thought and love as they were turned to meet my own. As she stooped over me, she said:

"I don't know what to say, Can, to let you know how pleased I ~~am~~—how confident I am that this will make you so much the happier and better man."

"You were laughing at my general beatitude early in the evening," I said, laughing then in my turn.

"Ah!" Canute—at a studied contentment, which was a little of an effort to please mother and me; which kept all your disappointments in life to yourself, like a good, patient, persevering fellow, who let not his shadows mar the home he made happy for them."

"I *was* content—I did not study to appear so, Nell."

"You would never own it."

"Perhaps I was losing faith in my own abilities—I was vain enough of them once upon a time."

"How many years ago?"

"No matter, no matter," I said; "the by-gones vanish away in the mist, and Fortune sheds a light on us for once. And if good luck never comes alone, why, there's *your* turn next, my girl."

"I have learned to despair already, Canute. There is nothing ahead of my life to disturb its mill-horse monotony. If I am content with teaching my thick-headed and thick-fingered pupils, that is sufficient for Nellie Gear."

I could see her thin white hand beating impatiently on the table as she spoke. My sister Nellie, ever excitable and impulsive, talking of content and life's monotony! That was the best joke we had had that evening!

CHAPTER II.

PREPARATION FOR DEPARTURE.

IN the interim between the despatch of my letter to Nettlewood House, inquiring if Tuesday morning next would suit Mrs. Zitman, and the reply, my mother had ample facilities for lecturing on the care and perseverance necessary to succeed in the new career lying then before me.

I bore the ordeal patiently; it pleased—nay, comforted—her to think that all her precepts were sinking deep within me, and that every word she uttered was to be treasured hereafter when new temptations were besetting me away from her.

“You have never been away from us, Canute, my dear,” said this good soul, “you have had no experience of the trials that lie ever in store for those working alone in the world. You will not be led away by display, or imbibe lofty notions which will inflate you with pride and lead you to despise all the old associations?”

“Do you think so?”

“Well, I do not, my dear boy,” confessed my mother, “but forewarned is forearmed, and you were always open to impressions. And do be persevering, Canute dear; don’t allow people to impose upon you too much, and save all the money you can for the rainy day which may be in store for you, and for us who may burden your progress for a long time yet.”

“I hope so, mother,—I hope so.”

“And Canute, dear, take a model.”

“Take a what?”

“Take a model, a pattern, from your brother Joseph. See how patient, how pains-taking how humble in his notions, and how careful with his money!”

“Very careful with his money, poor Jo!”

“Don’t speak contemptuously, Canute—a man careful of his money is a man that will grow rich, become respectable, and earn the esteem of his friends. There, don’t shuffle with your feet, my dear—whenever you begin that horrid shuffling, it is impossible for me to collect my ideas properly.”

“Take your time, mother.”

It pleased her to give me all these vague directions as to my conduct in life; she would have been unhappy for weeks after my departure if it had struck her that she had forgotten any wise adjuration, and I listened like a martyr, sitting on the end of the portmanteau I

had packed, with my mother facing me, and her two little fat hands crossed in her lap. She sat by the glass door of the parlour, and kept her watch on the shop—the little bookseller's shop, wherein the customers were few and far between, and came for postage stamps more often than anything else!

"Let me see, I was speaking of Joseph—the only shrewd head in the family, Canute—the only one who is preparing for the rainy day, and is careful in all his steps, God bless him!"

"Well, God bless him too—I bear him no ill-will, I admire his powers of self-denial. If we have not agreed very well together, it has been my fault, mother—my vile habit of speaking out when the occasion has seemed to warrant it."

"And you have only quarrelled about me, too—and your quarrels have soon been made up together."

"Yes—yes."

I knew by whose means that was effected—who took the trouble, for the mother's sake, to stray into the City, after one of these quarrels, and say, "Brother Joe, it upsets the old mother to think that there is a difference between us. Shake hands, man." But I did not call attention to any efforts on my own part to keep the waters flowing peacefully on—that would have been to have flung a Parthian dart at the son whom I was to take for a model. Besides, I was about to become indebted to Joseph for a few weeks—tomorrow, unless a cheque on account were forwarded in the return letter, I should be compelled to ask Joseph a favour. Hardly a favour from one brother to another, perhaps; but it was the first time that I had asked for any help for myself, and it looked like a favour, that was all. My brother Joseph was fourteen years my senior; the children that my mother had borne between him and me had all died. Ellen and I, the two youngest, were spared her. When my father died, he left a good business behind him, an old-fashioned jeweller and silversmith's in an out-of-the-way street near Cheapside. There was no ready money to leave behind him, all was sunk in stock or lent out to those who required money on their plate or jewels, &c. When he died, Ellen and I were completing our education, and Joseph had just married Miss Spinks, the saddler's daughter. My father left the business to Joseph for the benefit of himself, his mother, Ellen, and me. From the business that mother was to receive three hundred a-year for life, Ellen and I a hundred a-year each, so that the reader can understand that at that period it was a safe and profitable business, and even left behind the lion's share of profit for Joseph. But after my father's death, fortune turned its back upon us. There was a robbery of the premises to begin with—then there was a dreadful year of commercial panic, with "safe houses" toppling to the ground, and speculations that had appeared first-rate—that my own father would have embarked in—turning out the most unprofitable ventures; finally,

there came the bankruptcy of Joseph Gear. It was a terrible crash, and sobered Joseph—who had been even a little extravagant in his notions—for life. It taught him the value of money, the facility which it possessed for sliding away from the finger ends—it almost made a miser of him. After the bankruptcy was settled, he had scarcely ten pounds of his own left to begin the world with. He paid three shillings in the pound, and my mother, Ellen, and I came in as creditors on the estate—her three hundred a-year resolving itself into a neat little income of forty-five pounds per annum—Ellen's and mine dwindling almost to nothingness. My poor mother commenced business as a bookseller and fancy stationer, and Ellen, who was clever at the piano, began to canvass for pupils at the same time as brother Joseph commenced the world anew. I was in an architect's office by that time, and earning a little money; with the bookseller's shop, the little income of forty-five pounds, and the exertions of Ellen and me, we kept house together, and at least did not fall into debt. Joseph found friends to back him in the old business—my father's banker advanced him eight hundred pounds, I know—the tide turned a little, and my brother's shrewd head rose above the waters once more, though he never cared to own that he was anywhere save underneath them. This was the source of the sparring matches between Joseph and me—I maintaining that he was well off enough now to save my mother something of the worry and anxiety of business, he talking ever of the struggle it was to scrape his money together, of the difficulty of keeping the door barred in the face of that grisly wolf that is ever haunting society. But then he had altered very much; he was already like an old man; there was no enjoyment in his home or at his fireside.

We in Kennington troubled very little those in the heart of the City; my mother paid them a few flying visits, but Ellen and I did not stray in that direction more than once a year or so. We had the idea—perhaps it *was* a foolish one—that Joseph and Joseph's wife were never particularly glad to see us, and certainly kept no fatted calf in the back-yard awaiting our advent. They were careful people, objected to display, and turned their backs upon unnecessary expenses. They offered Ellen and me a cup of tea each and a few thin slices of bread and butter when we paid our annual visit; they talked of home and home matters, and gave us plenty of good advice between tea and supper-time—*supper-time*, but not supper, unless we stayed very late, and there was no excuse for keeping back the tray. Still all this I considered but extra economy, engendered by the great shock that had once shook the house of Gear. If it turned my brother's hair grey and sewed innumerable wrinkles in his face, was it to be wondered at that it altered very materially his inner nature? He had passed through the furnace of affliction and been hardened thereby, just a little—but I had not lost my confidence in the sterling metal which was in him somewhere. And we were always pretty

good friends, and only quarrelled on the one topic to which I have adverted. We jogged on pretty well together—until I was eight-and-twenty years of age I had not asked a favour from him.

This is a short preface for the better comprehension of what follows. I love a story myself that goes steadily on without turning back on fifty foggy retrospects, therefore I have judged the reader's taste by my own standard, and curtailed matters. From this time forth steadily on with *my* story, through all its labyrinth of trouble, mystery, and perplexity, darting off at a tangent into the region of romance at a time when the romance of most lives sobers down for ever!

Mrs. Zitman's letter came by the post anticipated. Wednesday morning, or Tuesday evening before eleven, P.M., would be agreeable to her—a train left Euston Square at nine, A.M., on the Monday, for Kendal. At Kendal I changed for Bowness, Windermere, which I might reach at seven in the evening of the same day. She left to my own judgment the method of reaching Nettlewood, Cumberland, in the clear day that would lie before me. There were coaches and cars to be obtained; if I came by the Gaps—whatever that might mean—she would recommend a good mule and a guide.

All this and more—and no cheque.

"Perhaps it's a lady patroness, that don't intend to pay," said my mother, doubtfully; "If I were you, I'd ask Joseph's advice."

"I am going to Joseph this evening."

"I—I think I'll come with you. I haven't seen the dear boy for two months."

I had grave doubts as to the necessity for my mother's company, for I had—though I tried to think it down—some doubts as to the manner in which brother Joseph would respond to the favour I was about to solicit. It was not likely that there were to be any words between us—but if there were any feelings to be hurt, I would have preferred as few witnesses as possible. My mother might "cry and go on"—it was a habit of hers at times—and "scenes" were my abomination. So I murmured something about a long round of calls, and the night air being unsuitable for her, and Ellen—who read me like a book—sided with me, and thought her mother had better not accompany me, as there were business matters to talk over.

My mother understood that there was a loan of a few pounds to be asked for—she took it for granted that it was simply to ask and have. Only a few pounds—twenty at the utmost—to borrow from brother Joseph, and one likes to borrow money with as much delicacy as possible. Perhaps she had better leave me to proceed to Newton Street alone. So at eight in the evening I was in Newton Street—a dimly lighted, dull, and narrow turning out of Cheapside, full of old-fashioned, old established shops, whose owners were waxing fat with profit. How did they make money?—who came down there to buy and sell?—why did they in that quiet street thrive as well as the inhabitants of the noisy rattling thoroughfare beyond? There is a

mystery about City trading which I have never attempted to fathom. I was never a thorough man of business, always something of a dreamer. In this street, a few yards from my brother's house, I encountered Ellen.

"Whatever has brought you in this direction girl?" I exclaimed.

"I thought you would not mind my company, just for once."

"Certainly not; but mother is all alone, and——"

"And so's Canute Gear, of whom I am to see so little after Monday next."

This was a bad explanation, and she was keeping something back. If she read me like a book there was something ever to be read in her face—the most earnest and beautiful face that ever a girl was dowered with, though I am her brother who write this. I was as proud of her beauty as my mother was in her heart—why, all the Gears were proud of Nellie's beauty, even Joseph, whose eyes wandered so little from his account books, was proud of this flower of our flock. He loved Ellen better than me or my mother, I verily believe—Ellen believed so too, and hence her appearance at my side to back my request. I saw that, though I did not venture to express as much just then, I was sorry that she had thought it necessary to stand by me, to save me perhaps the mortification of a refusal. She had her doubts as well as I had then.

Joseph Gear and his wife were very surprised to see us—taken aback, in fact. My brother was hard at work at his "books," a long quill pen was placed horizontally between his lips, and he was turning over leaf after leaf in search of a name, or account which required an immediate reference. Mrs. Gear was darning a pile of her husband's socks, in a methodical business-like manner, keeping the darned to the left and the undarned to the right, and breathing painfully through her sharp little nose.

Joseph and his wife were a well-matched couple—their outward appearance matched as well as their dispositions. They were both short, of spare form and sharp features, possessed both the same small grey eyes, which shot unpleasantly through you when a suspicion gave light to them, or a doubt of your intentions added to the intensity of their expression. To have seen them going to Church down Newton Street of a Sunday was an odd sight—for they were a diminutive toddling little couple, and when they turned the corner of a windy day, it was so hard a struggle to hold on by each other and prevent themselves being carried down Cheapside.

"Sit down, Canute—take a chair, Ellen," said my brother, without removing the pen from his lips; "glad to see you—won't detain you more than a minute or two."

We spent the next minute or two specified in shaking hands with Mrs. Gear. The ceremony was of a cold, fishy character; she was not a demonstrative woman; she did not say that she was glad to see us, or that she should presently put away her husband's socks and talk

to us in an amiable and friendly way. We were all used to her, however, and took her as we found her, as the phrase runs. Her peculiarities had long since ceased to disturb us—the greatest surprise to us would have been to see her laying her work aside, and asking with interest about us or our affairs. An odd woman, for whom we made every allowance as our brother's wife, but for whom we did not entertain any very great affection. We might respect her humility, her untiring and irritating industry, perhaps, but towards whom there was no drawing very closely. My sister Ellen in her younger days, had imbibed a very bad habit of "taking off" her sister-in-law, but she had out-grown that, and though I laughed less, I was glad of it. Poor girl! I thought once that she would never look soberly at life, but a few years hard teaching tamed her wonderfully. I was sorry now to see her so often grave and thoughtful, instead of wild, and excitable, and extravagant. We are never content with the present.

Joseph Gear's minute or two lasted nearly a quarter of an hour. I expected this, and sat with my back to the wall, and my head against the paper, until my sister-in-law called my attention to the latter position, and thought the grease might ooze out of my hair.

Ellen was left to entertain Mrs. Gear by talking of the weather, and the heat that was increasing with every step forwards into the summer. My sister-in-law agreed with her and stitched on; there was a noble pile of darned ones accumulating on the left side of her. Presently there was a long pause, and I was left to wonder how my brother, who seldom left home, managed to stump out the heels of so many socks.

"How's mother?" asked Joseph, suddenly becoming aware of the lone silence that had ensued.

"Very well, Joseph, thank you."

"Ninety and nine are ninety-nine, and two make a hundred and one. That's good hearing, Canute."

"She's rather dull about my leaving home, poor soul. I shall cheer her up with plenty of letters when I am in the country."

"And thirty-four are one hundred and thirty-five—thirty-seven, forty-three—fifty-six—Yes, I suppose so—fifty-nine. One hundred and fifty-nine pounds—dear me! I had no idea it had run on to so much as that!"

"Not a bad debt, I hope, Joseph?"

"Oh! no," with a scared look at me over his shoulder, "I've taken care—there's good security. I never lend money without good security, Canute."

"The best plan," I answered coolly—I who had not any security to offer him for the loan I was about to solicit! That loan began to trouble me excessively, to loom before my startled senses like the phantom of a bad dream. I had had an objection to ask him from the first; now my ears burned and my cheeks tingled as the

subject verged on revelation. I felt that there would be hesitation, if not refusal;—by some intuitive process, I had felt convinced of it from the first, and had tried to ridicule the doubts which beset me. Looking towards Ellen, I saw that her eyes were turned full of earnestness in my direction; I gave her a sickly smile by way of return, but she understood my nervousness, and did not smile back a reply. And yet, after all, what was it? Why did I feel so disturbed about the result? Surely not for the money's sake? No, no, for the sake of that little withered man bending over his books, rather than for the money. For the sake of him who I felt ought to love me as one of his own flesh and blood, and let not the thoughts of a few pounds stand between him and his brotherly affection. For the sake of the mother who thought so much of him; for the sake of that good opinion which I was anxious to preserve—to carry away to Cumberland with me, as a pleasant association by which I might remember him. As for the money, why, I had only to write to Mrs. Zitman and confess my poverty, or pledge a few things for a week or two. For the money I cared not one farthing—I had all my life set too little value on that grand desideratum.

Joseph closed his account-book, and put the pen behind his ear. In all my life I had scarcely seen him without a quill pen on that handy shelf. Ellen told him once that he took it to church, and to bed with him; and he told her in return not to be frivolous—she made too often a jest of business matters. She started in business for herself in due course, and there was not half so much jesting after that, though.

“Well, how's mother?” he said.

He had forgotten the inquiry heretofore made, and I communicated anew the glad tidings of her health. He muttered, “That's good hearing” again, and rubbed his thin hands over each other whilst he took stock of my general appearance.

“So you're going in the country, Canute?”

“Yes—next Monday. I thought I'd call and bid you good-bye at once.”

“Thankee—thankee.”

“You see the architect's business is likely to turn out well, after all. Your verdict was ever against it, Joseph, and kept me—though I never confessed it—a little unsettled.”

“I said, ‘stick to the surveying.’ Keep to the practical part, and not go dreaming on, and entering into fifty competitions for premiums you were never likely to get—half of which were already given away before the advertisement was issued.”

“Well, would it have been the best advice?”

“That depends upon how this venture may turn out. How very cold the nights are getting, Canute!”

“Almost cold enough for a fire,” I said, unconsciously.

He looked at me in an alarmed manner.

"Oh! no, not half so cold as that."

I glanced towards Mrs. Gear, whom I found very much in the way just then; if I dreaded Joseph Gear's comments, I had a still greater repugnance to any animadversions on the part of his better half. She was engaged, however. The socks had been heaped away into a wicker basket, and from some place near at hand had been produced a plain grey silk—"a best silk," which Mrs. Gear intended for Sunday wear, and which she was constructing herself for economy's sake. I have said that she was a woman with a keen eye, and something in the cut or set of Ellen's sleeve had arrested her attention, and led to inquiries, finally into a request that Ellen would just cut her out the pattern in the silk that was spread upon the table.

So whilst the women were busy over their dress-making, I broke suddenly through the ice. Not very gracefully, but with a crash, and a clumsy splash, that frightened Joseph considerably.

"Joseph, I want you, if you can manage it, to lend me twenty pounds for a few weeks. Only if it's handy, and the loan is not likely to inconvenience you," I added with a stammer, as my brother turned pale, flushed red and twitched nervously at the quill pen behind his ear.

They were busy over their silk patterns, at the table yonder, but Ellen's hand that had taken up the scissors, paused for an instant, and for an instant, also, the eyes of Mrs. Gear flashed towards me and her husband, then flashed back again.

My brother was a long while pumping up his answer. He laboured very much with his breath, and lifted his hands mechanically upon his knees, as though playing an imaginary harmonium. How I wished, the moment afterwards, that I had not asked him!—how I wished that I had struggled anyhow, or in any fashion, rather than have stooped to beg from him, and be shamed by his refusal!

"Why, you see, Canute, I am rather pressed just now—and there's bills to make up before the week runs out. I—I can't see very well how you're ever to pay me, supposing this new affair should prove to be a practical joke of somebody's. Twenty pounds is a large sum to lend all at once—I don't believe I have it in the house."

"We haven't got it in the house," affirmed Mrs. Gear, with a decisive snap, that was intended to cut short the subject.

If she had kept silent, Nellie would have also remained on the neutral ground. But the presence of another on the field brought her to the rescue on the instant. The scissors rent through the silk with a restlessness which brought a scream of agony to the lips of her sister-in-law—there was an ominous divergence to the right, that would have horrified any matron making up her "Sunday's best."

"Canute don't mean without security, Joseph," cried Nelly, as the scissors were shaken somewhat indignantly from her hand to the floor.

"What security?—whose security?" inquired the brother, regarding dubiously the flushed face of his young sister.

"Valuables to the amount, if you are afraid to trust him," she said. "Here's the gold watch that was bought me before the family ruin—will you take that and the chain, in pledge, till the money is paid?"

Watch and chain were off her neck, and flung on the table, before the words were ended; the works must have received no small shock from the sudden transition.

"Here's a ring my father gave me before he died, too, Joseph—will you have that also?"

She was making an effort to snatch that from her finger, when I called her to desist.

"It does not matter, Nellie,—the money is of no consequence, and can be obtained by fifty means less objectionable than this. Take up that watch and chain, Nellie—I won't have this."

Ellen obeyed me. In her excitement she had forgotten how much she was helping to pain me, as well as touch her eldest brother to the quick.

"I beg your pardon, Canute—I had forgotten you," she murmured.

"You are always so hasty, Ellen," said Mrs. Gear. "You do not make allowances for people being cautious in these times. And if we are pressed for money, and really haven't got the money, surely Canute and you have too much good sense to take offence?"

"No offence—no offence," I said, rising to my feet, very erect and dignified; "I would not take offence for many reasons—you have earned your money, and have a perfect right to stick to it, Jo. Let us get home, Nellie—our mother will become nervous about us."

Poor Joseph never looked so small—sitting there with his hands on his knees, heaped together, and confounded. He had nothing to say, nothing to urge—everything had happened so suddenly, and all his life he had been a man of method, taking things quietly and in regular order.

Ellen had risen too, and was ready to depart with me.

"I may as well take this opportunity of bidding you good-bye, Joseph," I said. "You'll look after mother now and then, I hope?"

"Yes," he muttered.

"I'm sorry that I put the question to you, and disturbed you so much," said I. Good-bye, Jo."

I held out my hand towards him: he shook it languidly in his, and said "Good-bye" in a half sulky, half-humiliated tone.

I was glad to escape with Ellen into the street, and relieve him from the embarrassment of my presence—glad to be walking with her at a very rapid pace towards Blackfriars Bridge again.

We did not speak for several minutes, but walked on in an excited manner. My sister Ellen was the first to break silence.

"Only twenty pounds, Can!—and to refuse you! Only twenty pounds to value your love and esteem by!"

"Hush, my girl! What does it matter?—what is the good of feeling indignant about it?"

"You were always too easy."

"The best way my girl, to bear the disappointments of life."

"Aren't you angry, then?"

"A little angry in my heart, perhaps," I confessed; "or a little stuffy in the throat. Don't let us think anything more about a matter that is unpleasant. I was an ass to ask him, knowing what a careful man he was."

"How will you get the money now?"

"Leave it to me."

"No; I will leave nothing to you. I must help you in my way, Canute."

"Well, we will talk of the matter in a few moments, Nellie," I said; "meanwhile, let me take the opportunity—perhaps the only one I may have for a long, long while—of talking about you and your future in the days that are ahead of us."

I fancied that her hand began to tremble upon my arm, and that her face was suddenly, sharply, turned away from me.

"Nellie!"

"Canute!" she responded, looking towards me again, "leave me the direction of my own future—it is in my own hands, and beyond all interference."

"Is there anything connected with it that I may not know?"

She changed colour, I fancied; but the night was dark, and I might have been full of fancies at the time.

"What is connected with it, I scarcely know myself," she said, with a short laugh; "everything is very unreal and intangible with me. You would only laugh at my follies."

"No."

"When you come back again, it will be time enough to talk of this, if there be anything worth talking about," she added quickly; "I don't know that there is—I don't believe that there is."

"This is a little incomprehensible, you will allow me to suggest," I remarked.


"Leave it so. Nothing can be half so incomprehensible to you as it is to me. After all, it is only a little misty; I am not unhappy, nay, I am more confident of being happy than ever I was in my life. But oh! Canute you are one less to love me after you are away in Cumberland!"

"Shall I love you the less for being apart from you?"

"I hope not—it is lonely in the world without you."

It was a cry that was akin to discontent, and I was sorry to hear it, though I professed to disregard it at the time, though I did not harass her by my persistency to discover all that which she had confessed was intangible to her. Was she, after all, the least patient of the Gears?—had the change from affluence to respectable indigence

affected her the most? Years ago, when she was a child, we had considered her a proud girl. Of late years, with nothing but her beauty to be proud of, we had not been struck with her peculiar trait of character. Had she outgrown it, or had it been a struggle to keep it hidden from her mother and me? She had worked bravely with the rest of us, and each took too earnestly a share in the common weal to note any particular change with our great change in life. She had been a girl who was ever jealous of affection—quick to love those who evinced any affection for her. Her words were ringing in my ears still when we hastily resolved ourselves into a committee of ways and means, as to the best method of raising twenty pounds to start me decently in life.



CHAPTER III.

JOSEPH'S REPENTANCE.

The next morning, in a few words, I told my mother of the result of my appeal to Joseph Gear. I treated the matter very carelessly and my mother, anxious to throw the best light on the position of affairs, took up the cause with her characteristic readiness.

"Joseph has a very shrewd head, Canute, dear," said my mother "he sees a flaw in your coming fortune somewhere, rely upon it."

"He has an excellent eye for flaws, mother."

"Ah! he always had," replied my mother, taking my response in the most literal manner; "that is what made him so useful in the business when he was a lad. Did he give you any advice before you left him?"

"Oh! no," was my dry response to this.

"Dear, dear, dear—what will you do, then?"

"Do without it in the best manner I can, mother. Shall I give you a sketch of my own ideas on the question?"

"Yes."

"I purpose writing to Mrs. Zitman for an advance of twenty pounds, if it be not convenient to forward my cheque for the whole sum due to me as top-boy of the class. If she decline—which I don't think she will—why, I shall begin to doubt if there's any good luck awaiting my arrival in Cumberland. That's plan No. 1. Plan No. 2 is to go to a loan society; plan No. 3 is to lay the case before my

own employer, who was never a hard man; plan No. 4 is to raise the money by "spouting" the family plate; plan No. 5 is to buy a pocket pistol and take to the road—Waterloo Road, for instance."

"Good gracious, Canute, how is it possible for any one to follow you?"

"Think them all over, while I attempt to stir the iron bound mould at the foot of your favourite willow, mother."

"I'll try, my son. Oh! dear, that will be your last piece of gardening for many a long day."

"Never mind. Think of the good luck ahead, and the great name I am beginning to build for myself. Think of that first, and then of my plans."

"Ye-es."

I went into the garden, or rather the back-yard in which my mother's willow was making a strong effort to live under difficulties and chimney smoke. There was a story connected with that willow—it had been with us in sickness and in health; in the garden attached to our villa at Hornsey; in the garden of the little house we exchanged for the villa; in the back-yard of the premises wherein we at present drew breath. My sister Ellen had planted it on her eighth birthday, and it had struck root and flourished. My mother had taken quite a fancy to this tree—whilst she lived it should ever accompany her, for her little daughter's sake, she said. She was ever prone to be superstitious, and the grim fancy at once suggested itself that Ellen would not live to be a woman, therefore she had clung to that willow as to something which would keep Ellen's memory green when the dear girl was lost to her. Afterwards, when Ellen had grown up she treasured it for Ellen's sake, for past associations connected with it, for the sake of the remnant which it was of the better times from which we had drifted away. So the willow had borne three transplantings, the last a rough one, that had affected its constitution a little, aged it before its time, and made it a brown rather than a green willow—but still a willow, with life and strength left to struggle on. It had reached Kennington Road with some difficulty, and been passed over sundry back yards and walls with greater difficulty still, amidst the applause of an army of boys, who had collected in a side street to superintend the process.

And under this willow I set to work with the spade at my last effort at gardening.

My work was not finished when the yard-door opened, and Joseph Gear made his appearance before me. He wore his usual blue dress coat and nankeen trousers—but the coat looked tighter and the trousers shorter than usual. They always did when he had something on his mind.

"Good morning, Canute."

"Good morning, Joseph."

He kept his right hand in his trousers pocket, and made no attempt

to shake hands with me. His keen grey eyes regarded very intently the work at which I was engaged.

"That's rather a ridiculous employment, Canute," he remarked.

"Not the most profitable, perhaps; but the willow's looking brown, and its the youngest of the family, and requires rather more attention."

My brother shrugged his shoulders; he had ever a distaste to poetical ideas.

"I've brought you twenty pounds, Canute," he said, after a long pause.

"Thank you."

"You don't seem very much surprised?"

I was surprised but I concealed my feelings exceedingly well. Nay, more, I was rejoiced at this sign of brotherly feeling getting the better of a natural parsimony. It brought the tears into my eyes, and necessitated energetic digging to hide them. After all, he was a good fellow at heart, and valued me and my love at something more than the money I wanted.

"Surprised?—not much. After all, isn't it the most natural thing in the world?—we two sons of a dead father, who loved us both with all his heart. I thought it might be a joke of yours last night."

"It wasn't a joke," he affirmed.

"Well, a leap at a resolution which you thought better of, remembering our relationship. We won't talk of the by-gones—I'll forget I called at Newton Street, last night."

"Here's the money—what are you going to do with it?"

He drew his right hand, with some notes in it, for the first time from his pocket since he had left the city that morning.

"Take care of it, you may depend. Many thanks, Jo. Shall I give you an I.O.U. for the amount?"

"When we go in—if you are going in just now. I—I wouldn't keep digging at that ridiculous tree with twenty pounds in my pocket."

"We'll go in, Joseph,"

"Excuse me, but don't you—don't you have buttons to those pockets of yours?"

"Never."

"Good Lord!"

"I don't think that they have been in fashion since George the Third's time."

"Fashion!"

What a hearty contempt for the weakness of three-fourths of the human race was there expressed in my brother's reply!

We entered the parlour together, where I immediately produced my desk, and set about writing an I.O.U. for twenty pounds. Joseph watched the process and fidgeted from one foot to another, and

scratched one ear, behind which was certainly an old quill pen still.

"I—I don't think it's—it's—necessary, perhaps, between us two."

"It's more business-like."

"Yes, it's more business-like, certainly, but it's not of much consequence. If—if you never pay me, I'm quite prepared for the blow."

"There's the I.O.U. We must not forget the business-habits which our father instilled into both of us."

"Well, no."

He took my warrant for the money—thought I wrote a very bad hand—which there is not the slightest doubt of—placed the document very carefully in a pocket-book, which he had produced from some secret receptacle.

My mother sat watching all this with a pleased smile; Joseph's generosity had touched her heart. Joseph's business-like habits had always commanded her reverence.

"Where's Ellen this morning?" asked my brother.

"Out teaching, the dear girl," was my mother's response.

"She's getting a very bad temper—did *that* watch stop?"

"I really have forgotten to inquire," I said with a laugh.

"I never saw a watch slapped about so much in my life. By the way, mother, you need not let Mrs. Gear know that I have called here this morning. Women know so little about business."

We made the required promise.

"Strictly between ourselves—strictly between ourselves," he repeated twice. "I always hated a fuss about anything. When are you going to lock up your money?"

"Directly."

"In that rubbishing desk?"

"No, in a little strong box I have up-stairs."

"That's better hearing—good day."

"Good day. When I get my reward of merit from Mrs. Zitman, I shall forward you the twenty pounds at once."

"Thankee."

He went slowly out of the shop into the street. In a moment afterwards, he turned into the shop again.

"What name did you say?"

"Zitman."

"And lives in Cumberland?"

"Yes, Nettlewood, Cumberland. You'll remember the address, if you have time to spare to drop me a line."

"Oh, yes!"

He went in a dream-like fashion out of the shop, to return a second time in a less automaton manner.

"If you should send the money back by letter, mind, only the halves, and wait till they're acknowledged. Good-day."

He did not appear again, and, shortly afterwards, I repaired to my room to lock up my twenty pounds.

Poor Joseph's hair would have risen erect with horror had he seen the bottle of sherry which we bought on the Sunday evening to drink success to my new start in life. My mother even thought I was extravagant; we had had so little to do with wine of late years. Candidly, we had barely lived and kept out of debt.

Mother and Ellen drank my health, the tears of the former running into her wine-glass and mingling with her Amontillado. This was her first parting with "her boy;" his first departure from the apron-strings, which boys, younger than I, so quickly learn to break away from. I felt like a child going away on a long journey, to a destination where there would be no mother to take care of me from that day forth. Possibly I was younger in thought than most men of my age, for I had thought much of home, and those who had made it a dear home—despite all its poverty—to me. I had lived, and suffered, and struggled, and borne privation with these two—helping to keep the mother's heart light, at least. Thank God! I had the power to do that, and, therefore, life had not been profitless with me. If she had not understood me, or my ambitions, that was a little side trouble which I thought little of, and which nobody guessed.

Ellen and I played our best characters that evening—we feigned the best of spirits, for the mother's sake. Ellen ventured into the regions of necromancy, and prophesied the life awaiting me—a large fortune by way of surveyor's commission, a handsome present from the lady requiring so palatial a residence, a young lady to fall in love with me—a lady with property, to wind up the story in the most satisfactory manner.

"To fall in love with Canute! Oh! there's plenty of time for him to get that nonsense into his head," said my mother.

"To fall in love with me!" I echoed; "I who have engendered a half-stoop by bending over my desk, and am aging so fast; who have grey hairs already in my flaxen pow, and crow's-feet at the corners of my sleepy eyes. It's too late for any one to fall in love with me, at all events."

"Wait till they understand you like I do, dear old Can," cried Nellie.

I looked at myself in the dressing-glass that night, and wondered not what any Cumberland young lady would think of me, but whether my appearance would be likely to impress my benefactress. I was tall and thin, and eight-and-twenty years of age. I hoped that I *did* look considerably older than that—I had always flattered myself that I looked double my years till then—or Mrs. Zitman would think me a very young architect, incapable of carrying out my plans to advantage; would perhaps lose confidence in me, and send me back discomfited to George Street. Confound it! how very young I looked

that evening! Was it the Amontillado sherry, which the publican at the corner had recommended me as a choice article, or the new thoughts, the new hopes, which had taken much care from my face. Too young and inexperienced, by all that was horrible, after all!

That same thought perplexed me when I started next day by an early train for Kendal, Westmorland. My mother and sister saw the last of me, waved their hands towards me so long as I hung out of the third-class window, and kept the platform in sight. I know they prayed for my good fortune, my better days, and my safe journey in search of them, as heartily as I muttered my hope that God would watch over those two women whom I left behind to fight their battles alone.

So ends the still life of Canute Gear—the prologue to his story.

END OF BOOK I.

BOOK II.

NETTLEWOOD FERRY.

“Whoever looks on life will see
How strangely mortals disagree.”

Cawthorn.

“Our faults are at the bottom of our pains;
Error, in acts, or judgment, is the source
Of endless sighs: we sin, or we mistake.”

Young.

CHAPTER I.

"MAD WENFORD."

I HAD held a long council of war with myself previous to settling on my route to Nettlewood. There were two methods of arriving thither: one by proceeding by train direct to Penrith, and working my way to Nettlewood by coach or car; the second by making for Bowness, Windermere, and proceeding, by a more picturesque if a little circuitous route, across country to my destination. My old master, who had been born in Westmorland, strongly recommended the adoption of the latter plan; thought even it was the nearer and better way, take it altogether.

"Make for Borrowdale, through Keswick," were his injunctions, "then go on foot the rest of the way, or all the breath in your body will be bumped out of you in a Cumberland car. There's no getting at Nettlewood save by a mountain road, or by a long circuitous route through Portinscale and Braithwaite."

"Nettlewood is not a lively place, then?"

"Well, I can't say that it is."

"It must be a lovely place, though, and I, who have seen but little of the country, will enjoy the change vastly."

"If you don't catch the horrors, Mr. Gear."

"Oh! I'm not subject to them."

"People accustomed to the turmoil of cities have been known to go melancholy-mad in mountain districts," he said, with a laugh.

I laughed also.

"I'll chance it, sir."

And I had chanced it, and was speeding on to the North of England in search of my new mistress.

The train left Euston Square at nine in the morning. Nothing worthy of remark occurred till four in the afternoon, when the train reached the noisy, smoky town of Preston, and a delay of twenty minutes, occasioned by a change of carriages, &c., ensued. I had travelled in the most economical manner, in one of the usual third-class black holes placed at the disposal of the public whenever it undertakes long journeys, and was glad to escape, from my hard seat and the pressure of a crowded compartment, to the platform. Here I mingled with the crowd and fought with my contemporaries for a cup of coffee and a biscuit, wondering whether my racking head-ache would last much longer—and then what they were doing in Kennington Road, and finally, whether the tall, burly man with the sandy moustache was a lord, or a railway-director, that he received so much attention from everybody who recognized him.

This man began to arrest my attention more and more—to absorb it so utterly, that, had it not been for a friendly guard, I should have left my portmanteau in the waiting-room, and gone destitute and garmentless to Windermere. He was an extraordinary man, who attracted attention from more strangers than myself; he made himself a conspicuous character at the refreshment counter, and necessarily drew all eyes towards him. His height, in the first place, was remarkable, being an inch or two above six feet; his dress was remarkable for the scrupulous exactitude of its fit—it must have been built on him, I thought—he wore lemon kid gloves, that fitted like his skin, and on the top of his light brown hair was perched a small, oddly-cut French cap, that gave quite a Punchinello character to his upper extremity. Above all, and before all, his manner was remarkable; he was paying particular attention to one of the young ladies at the refreshment counter, uttering his soft nothings, however, in a tone that might be heard half over the waiting-room.

I heard him say,

“If I make you an offer of my hand, Polly, will you accept it? Upon my soul, I’m tired enough of single life, and am looking round for a wife that can take care of me, and keep my feet from straying the wrong way into the Slough of—the Slough of——what the devil was the name of that slough, now?”

The name of the slough appeared to absorb all his attention an instant afterwards. He bit one finger-nail after another, and stood and swore volubly concerning the nomenclature, and stamped with his feet, and beat his gloved hand impatiently on the counter. I had finished my biscuit at his side, and an irresistible something led me to offer my assistance in relieving his excitement.

“Possibly you mean the Slough of Despond, sir.”

“That’s it, by —— I thank you, sir—I thank you.”

He raised his odd cap, and saluted me with a gravity and stateliness that compelled me to raise my hat in return. As I walked away from the counter, he looked intently after me.

It was at this juncture that the guard called my attention to the fact that I was leaving my portmanteau behind me. I thanked him and returned. The tall gentleman at the counter broke into a hoarse laugh as he became aware of my blunder.

“You might have made a mess of it there, sir.”

“It would have been rather awkward, certainly.”

“Devilish awkward. What bell’s that?”

“The bell for the down-train,” some one replied.

He uttered an oath, and strode away without so much as a farewell to the lady with whom he had been attempting a flirtation. At the door he snatched from the arm of a guard a long blue cloak lined with scarlet, dropped some money into the guard’s hand, and marched down the platform.

The man followed him.

"Any particular carriage, sir?" touching his cap.

"Anything you like. Where are the dogs?"

"All right in the dog-box, sir."

"And my whip and gun?"

"We put them in the luggage van, sir. If you want them, sir, I can get them out in a minute, sir."

"Let them be where they are, and don't make yourself so damned officious. What's this?"

He stepped back from the first-class carriage, the door of which the guard had opened for him.

"I hate empty carriages—suppose I was to have a fit, or die in one. Don't you know by this time that I am partial to society?"

"This is the only first-class attached to this train, sir."

"Give me a third, then."

"What, sir?"

"A THIRD!" bawled the traveller. The man shrank as though he expected a buffet to follow the enunciation, and then led the way to a third-class compartment, to the very compartment wherein I was seated with three other occupants.

"We don't want the fool here," muttered an old man with white hair.

He was a Lancashire man, and evidently knew his customer.

"Who is he?" I ventured to inquire.

"Mr. Wenford of Nettlewood—Mad Wenford, some people call him."

"Good gracious, not mad!" ejaculated a nervous old lady who had travelled with me from Euston Square, nursing an immense band-box all the way.

"About as mad as I am," grumbled the man.

Mr. Wenford came into the carriage the moment afterwards, the man who had expressed his discontent being the first to touch his hat obsequiously. Wenford only acknowledged the salutation by a rude stare, however, and took his place in a corner of the carriage facing me. The guard locked us in, and went away grinning from ear to ear. He joined another guard, and the two stood laughing and shrugging their shoulders until the train moved slowly away from the platform.

"There is nothing more dismal in life than travelling alone in a railway carriage," he said.

The remark was not addressed to me in particular, but he was facing me and looking hard at me, and I ventured a reply.

"It must be dull, if one has a long journey before him."

"Long or short, it doesn't matter much," he said abruptly.

"No—perhaps not."

He did not appear inclined to sustain a conversation; considering that he was a lover of society, he evinced some contempt for present company. He curled himself in his cloak, keeping the crimson side outwards, stretched forth his long legs, and relapsed into a comatose state, from which no one cared to arouse him.

I fancied that he had been drinking; there was a strong aroma of brandy when he first came in, and the suddenness with which he dropped into a disturbed kind of slumber seemed sure evidence of the validity of my suspicions. There was nothing before me but to keep my eyes on this man, or imitate his example by shutting them. I had read every line of the newspaper I had purchased at Euston Square; all the advertisements in Bradshaw I had learned by heart, the times of the departures and arrivals of trains were not particularly amusing, and here was a character that was a little out of the common way. I kept my eyes upon the sleeping man then; I was interested in him; he was living at Nettlewood, and in all probability was a man who would often cross my path. This was a specimen of what Nettlewood could produce—a sample, perhaps of the Nettlewood gentility. The specimen did not please me, though it interested me. Mr. Wenford was evidently not a lovable being; a man of eccentric habits, who paraded his eccentricities a little too ostentatiously, as though he were proud of them—a man, perhaps, who tried to be eccentric, and therefore a despicable character at the best.

He sat with his head thrown back, and his French cap nearly off his head. There was every opportunity of studying the man's personal appearance. His was a face that would have pleased some people, repelled others. Take it altogether, it was a good-looking face, though the eyes were too close together, and the lips coarse and sensual. It was a bold, fresh-coloured face—the forehead was massive and broad, but jutted unpleasantly forward—the nose was one of the most aristocratic hooks I had ever met with. He wore a moustache, too, that in my opinion at least did not conduce to any facial ornamentation; possibly his own opinion was different, for he had cultivated it to an extraordinary length—it was a sandy rope of some thickness, that trailed before him and on to his waistcoat like a Grand Turk's. To make up for this display, he had abjured whiskers altogether, and wore a turned-down shirt collar, that displayed a red throat which would not have discredited a Cumberland bull's. So far, this was Mr. Wenford, of Nettlewood—Mad Wenford, as some people called him, it appeared. From the deference that was paid him, it was evident that he was a rich man, or a man at least who was lavish with his money. Doubtless, a great man at Nettlewood, where company was scarce and money scarcer amongst the poorer folk inhabiting the place. He had the manners of a man whose will was law in the mountain district where he lived; and he looked like a rich man dozing there before me. The gold chain that meandered over his well-fitting waistcoat was the thickest gold cable that I had ever seen. On the little finger of his left hand, from which he had drawn his lemon-kid glove, glittered a diamond as big as a hazel nut. There was a dog-whistle studded with rubies hanging by a hair chain, which had escaped from his vest as he slept.

Mr. Wenford woke twice before we reached Lancaster. The first

time in a bad temper, wherein he cursed my portmanteau—which was under the seat—for being in the way for his long legs ; the second time in an amiable mood, that demonstrated how pleasant he could be when he had a mind that way.

He sat up, adjusted his Polichinello cap, stroked his moustaches, and then looked me full in the face.

"Are you for Carlisle, sir?"

"No, for Nettlewood, in Cumberland."

"Indeed!"

He elevated his eyebrows, and looked inquiringly at me. I anticipated that his next question would have been to have asked my business in that remote quarter of the lake district; on the contrary, he steered clear of a direct question, with the tact of a well-bred man

"It is a pretty spot; a trifle too remote and dull for most minds. You are perhaps of a studious turn?"

"Only a little inclined that way."

"You possess the thoughtful—even the abstracted—look of a man who makes a world within himself. You might be an author or a poet now?"

"Oh! no," I answered laughingly.

"Excuse the remark," he added, laughing too; it was a rude question."

"On the contrary—quite a compliment,"

"May I ask another rude question?"

"Certainly."

"How do you intend to proceed to Nettlewood? Have you sketched out any plan?"

"I have been recommended to take the steamer down the Windermere Lake to Ambleside."

"Yes," he broke in with.

"To proceed by car or coach to Keswick or Borrowdale, and walk the rest."

"Walk the rest?" he inquired.

"Is it so long a distance?"

"A long distance, and a dangerous way without a guide, if this misty weather continue—through the Black Gap, I suppose?"

"I don't know—I am a stranger to Cumberland."

"So it seems."

This was the first sign of his old abrupt demeanour—he was everything by turns and nothing long. When the train stopped at Lancaster, we both retained our seats; half the people who caught sight of him at the carriage window appeared to know him, and to stare at his appearance in a third-class carriage. This seemed to amuse him; once he passed his jewelled hand over his face, to hide a peculiar smile, which he had not intended me to see.

"If you haven't a world within yourself, sir," he said, suddenly

reverting to a past remark of his, "you will find Cumberland—especially Nettlewood, Cumberland—somewhat of a dreary vale of rest. One can't take comfort from inaction there, unless he be very weary, or very ignorant of the world."

"I am a lover of nature."

"Nature palls after a while."

"I shall have plenty to do, I hope."

"Plenty to do!" he ejaculated; "by all that's holy, that makes a difference! You must be the architect who is coming to build a fine house by Nettlewood Lake for Mrs. Zitman."

I had no occasion to enwrap myself in any particular disguise, which in a day or two must inevitably fall; perhaps it was as well to let this grandee become aware that I was simply a poor architect and surveyor, proceeding to Nettlewood on business.

I replied that I was the architect for whom Mrs. Zitman had sent.

"I had expected to see an older man," he remarked; "as if any expectations ever framed could possibly approach the realization of one's thoughts. Your name is Gear?"

"Yes, sir."

"We were talking of you only a few days ago. Looking over your plans for the new building to enshrine a somewhat whimsical old lady."

"A very old lady?"

"As old as the Cumberland hills, I was going to add, and as full of changes as the weather which those hills seem to affect. Cross-grained and ill-tempered, as hard as granite and as forbidding as Hecate—upon my soul, sir, I do not envy you your task!"

This was a damper with a vengeance, but I put the best face on the shady side of the question. He was watching me somewhat keenly, as if to note the effect of his words, but my manner did not betray any surprise at his harsh criticism on a lady neighbour.

"I presume that she will not interfere with my superintendence of the building?"

"She will interfere with your design to begin with. She will turn it topsy-turvy, and suggest an alteration here, a modification there; she will want an extinguisher watch-tower at one end, from which she may see her enemies coming through the Black Gap, when the weather's fine enough, and a stone summer house at the other to catch the sun's rays, and keep her withered old frame from shaking itself to death with ague. It will be Zitman's house, rather than Gear's."

"Upon my honour, you surprise me."

"Take my advice, and fly back to London on the wings of the wind, before trusting yourself with a she-wolf."

"I never turn back when I have once made up my mind."

"One of the dogged, go-ahead kind, then?"

"One of the patient, persevering order, my friends think me. I can't say—I'm no judge of character."

"Not of your own?"

"Well, I never studied that."

"You're an odd fellow, by——"

He evidently expected me to laugh at this last assertion, backed as it was by one of his emphatic oaths, but the humour in the remark did not suggest itself, and I maintained a somewhat stolid demeanour. We reached Kendal Junction in a little under the hour after this; the train did not proceed direct to Windermere, and those who were bound for the lake-district had to bring their luggage and themselves on to the platform. Mr. Wenford was one of these, and he and his dogs, his gun and his whip, were under his sole protection again. He carried his gun on his shoulder, his whip in his hand, and his dogs—two ugly brown mastiffs, continually on the sniff at strange people's legs—wandered about the platform, and were lashed at very unnecessarily by their master.

Referring to my time-table, I found that there was no train for Bowness, Windermere, for an hour and a half—a time wherein I fancied some refreshment more solid than biscuits might be obtained for the inner man. A similar idea suggested itself at the same time to the tall gentleman who had travelled third-class with me from Preston.

"Are you going into the town, Mr. Gear?"

"For a short while. I have not dined yet."

"Nor I."

He went out of the station with me, flourishing and cracking his whip in the air and at the dogs.

"Do you know Kendal?" he inquired.

"I am a stranger to this part of the country."

"Let me lead the way to an hotel for you."

"I never patronize hotels," I replied.

I thought it as well to hazard that observation, lest Mr. Wenford should lead me into unlooked for expenses. It was as well that Mr. Wenford should understand at once that I was a poor man. Besides, I did not like him, and felt that his absence would be a considerable relief to me.

I stopped at a small house in the beginning of the town. There was "Temperance Hotel" written over the door—this was evidently an establishment suited to my means.

Mr. Wenford stopped also, and looked up disparagingly at the premises. The two dogs sniffed their way into the passage and rooms opening therefrom. Presently there was a scream or two, a vociferous barking, then the rush of a cat out of the house, through Mr. Wenford's legs into the street, then the two dogs in full chase and horribly excited, then the landlady's son with a broomstick, finally the landlady herself trembling with fear and passion.

Wenford shouted to his dogs, and administered a few wild cuts at them; the landlady's son dropped his stick and touched his hat; the

landlady, to whom Mr. Wenford was an unfamiliar object; however, attacked both of us, and gave us a piece of her mind on the instant.

"If we must keep two such ugly brutes, why didn't we keep them in proper order, and not let them loose into other people's premises to frighten people to death? The couple of us ought to be ashamed of ourselves, and we were no gentlemen, or we shouldn't stand staring there at her!"

Mr. Wenford bore with the reproof for a little while, and then exploded with a vehemence that frightened the landlady's son, and his two dogs. The dogs crouched at their master's feet; the landlady's son, evidently a nervous youth, stood with his back to the house and shivered; the landlady turned pale, red, fairly collapsed, and went off into hysterics.

I need not set down here the full, true, and particular reply of Mr. Wenford to the hostess of the "Temperance Hotel;" it was not characterized by any forbearance or chivalric courtesy to the softer sex; it was the raving of a demented profligate. He shouted at the top of his voice, he swore the most frightful oaths at her, her cat, her habitation, and her interference; he cursed her and Kendal, and temperance hotels for ever and ever; he told her that she was drunk and mad, or she would have known to whom she was speaking; he vowed the most frightful vengeance on her, her heirs, successors, and assigns, for the gross indignity that had been proffered him; he accompanied every sentence with a sharp crack of his whip, that kept the dogs at his feet, shaking in every muscle with nervous excitement.

I gave up all hopes of dining at Kendal; I was glad to escape from Mr. Wenford, and leave him to bully the landlady to his heart's content; unobserved by that gentleman, I wended my way back to the railway station, found my portmanteau still in the corner where I had left it, took up my position in the little waiting-room, and composed myself to wait patiently for the coming train to Windermere.

It was not till the train had arrived that Mr. Wenford made his appearance, whistling an opera air of the most pathetic description. He was in the best of spirits, and looked the picture of amiability. He addressed himself familiarly to the railway guards—who appeared charmed by the condescension—he even thanked them for taking the dogs, the gun and the whip off his hands once more. He did not look round for me, but stepped at once into a first-class carriage, and gave the guard half-a-crown to keep it locked against all intruders—"he hated society," I heard him say before the key was turned on him.

At the Windermere station I lost sight of him immediately. There were omnibuses from the various hotels at Bowness waiting to convey passengers to the village; there were two saddled horses being held by a groom; and there was a little crowd of touters to fight my way through.

"How far do you reckon it to Bowness, lad?" I asked of a shock-headed youth who was standing with his hands in his pockets admiring the saddle horses.

"About a moile, or a moile and a arf."

"Thank you."

"Shall I carry your portmantoo, sir?"

"Catch hold."

I was glad to be rid of my luggage, and to find a guide to Bowness—ininitely glad to get rid of Mr. Wenford, and obtain a chance of stretching my legs, so horribly cramped with that long journey. The stars were out in Westmorland; there was a slight wind rustling the trees; the air felt fresh and fragrant to my heated senses—my headache was improving every instant. My guide and I went on down the road; the omnibuses rattled by us towards Bowness; two tourists who had come by the same train with me, and were in a greater hurry than I, tramped by me; presently we had the dark road all to ourselves.

Close upon Bowness, two horsemen, followed by two dogs, dashed past me and the boy. The taller one looked down as he galloped by.

"Good night, Mr. Gear."

"Good night, sir."

"Compliments to all good friends at Nettlewood House. Don't forget them!"

He and his groom, who were riding side by side, were far ahead of me the moment afterwards.

That was not the last I saw of him, however. There was no disguising that stalwart form, and that ridiculous cap he poised on the top of his head.

Late that night, after I had dined at my inn—try the inns of Bowness, reader, the good old-fashioned inns of that Westmorland village, in preference to the modern hotels there—I strolled forth down the sloping roads to the banks of the immortal lake. I was restless and excited, and could not settle down that evening: Mr. Wenford, or Mr. Wenford's remarks, had disturbed the even tenor of my way.

He had spoken of a whimsical, even a hard taskmistress—he had advocated my flying back to London in preference to continuing my journey. The uncertainty of that which was before me seemed already to cast a shadow on the track I was pursuing. I was tired, but the thoughts of seeking my bed-chamber were distasteful to me; the moon had risen since my late dinner, and I sallied forth in search of the picturesque.

The picturesque did not divert my mind that night, however—the shadow was too dark and impenetrable before me; the friends I had left in London seemed very far away, and troubled me more than there was any necessity for. The glassy lake so still before me, the

islands dotting it, the mountains far beyond them, looking so dim and misty in the full moonlight of that night, did not lead my thoughts astray. I felt the influence of the scene, its novelty, its bewildering beauty in itself; but I felt no pleasure, no sense of calmness, no gratification at the great change that had befallen me.

Twelve or thirteen hours ago in the London streets; now in the garden of paradise. From London, where it had been a struggle to live and keep home together, to this place, where, in all probability, better fortune awaited me, and yet so disturbed, so dissatisfied!

By the lake's margin, and in the neighbourhood of Bowness used to be, possibly are now, a few fixed seats for the accommodation of the many visitors to this delightful spot. They were vacant this evening, with one exception. Two men sat side by side with their faces to the lake, and their backs to the road along which I was sauntering. They were talking very earnestly together, and did not turn as I passed them. One of the speakers was Mr. Wenford, his figure was unmistakable; the other was evidently a younger man, of slighter build. Both were smoking cigars.

"I don't admire your style of going to work," I heard the younger say.

"I have puzzled him, as I puzzle everybody," was the conceited answer.

"Well, what do you think of him?" the younger speaker asked, in a somewhat impatient tone.

"That he will be a trouble to us. That he's dangerous."

I passed on. I went on down a shady road that diverged a little from the lake. I might have been walking in a dream for the reality of anything around me. Who would be a trouble?—who was dangerous?

I found my way back to Bowness by another road on my left. I did not cross his path again that night. I had a dread of meeting him.

By any moral deduction whatever, was it possible to believe that Wenford and his companion had been speaking of me? I thought not—after a hard struggle with a foolish suspicion, I thought *that* down at least. No one could believe that trouble was to follow my arrival, or that there was danger keeping step with ME!

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK GAP.

FROM the buxom landlady of the inn I obtained, next morning, some further information as to the roads and Cumberland travelling, which decided my future course for good.

By the steam-boat down the lake to Ambleside—by coach from Ambleside to Keswick, where I could leave my portmanteau to be sent on to Nettlewood by any means available, and make my own way through Borrowdale to the bridle road and mountain path which led to Mrs. Zitman's house. By these means I should see a great deal of the landscape, test my pedestrian powers, which had been rusting from disuse, reach by the evening my point of destination. I had no fear of losing my way, thanks to a pocket map that had been purchased, trade price, before I left Euston Square yesterday. Most of my morbid thoughts, I found had vanished by the morning; I had slept off my fatigue, and the world was no longer full of tortuous roads, ending in mystery. Somehow, yesterday, I had engendered round me a halo of romance—I who had always laughed at people's romantic feelings, and professed to think them distorted children of vain folks' affectation. Now I was matter-of-fact and practical again—I was in the lake district on business—I had only met with a half-drunken bully, whose manners and customs were not of the slightest consideration to me.

I started at an early hour. The first steam-boat on the lake that morning took me and a few travellers to Ambleside. The weather was propitious, though a man on board the boat prophesied rain and wind rather vainly, I thought; the sun was shining in a cloudless sky—the mountains beyond were full of green and purple shadows.

I enjoyed the country that morning; it was a new life for me, in which I could luxuriate. A fair morning a glorious landscape, every bend of the lake bringing forth fresh scenes, mountain after mountain range opening on my view, life and light all dissipating the morbid dreaming that had troubled me a short while since. I was in good time for the coach to Keswick; outside that vehicle I took a further lease of life's enjoyment. I was in Keswick before twelve o'clock; I spent a quarter of an hour arranging for the transmission of my portmanteau thence to Nettlewood, and then I set forth, fortified for a true pedestrian scramble by a stout walking-cane and a pocket map. I was a vain man, confident in my own resources to find my way, and drop into Nettlewood Vale from the mountain path which was delineated

in my map by a dotted line—evidently a path that nobody could miss.

I caught myself humming a favourite song of Ellen's by Derwentwater Lake—my spirits had risen so beneath the influence of fine weather and fair scenery. Given a moderate income, a few dear friends, an occupation not too often intruded upon by the whims of patrons and patronesses, and life at Nettlewood would be something enviable in contrast to the old life at Kennington. I had begun already to build my castles in the air; I was to lay the corner-stone of my fortune here; to take a cottage here for my mother and Ellen, in the good time lying so short a distance from the present. If the erection of this mansion took six months, nine months, twelve months, and there was a chance of other work to follow this, why, it would cost very little to have mother and sister at my side again. There was something objectionable in the idea of those two slaving out their souls in the London Streets, whilst I revelled in God's sunlight, and grew strong and brave in a world of which I had scarcely dreamed.

I marched on, swinging my stick, singing Ellen's song, or thinking of the better days—varying both now and then by a laugh at the peculiarities of Mad Wenford, the man who had been my *bête noire* only a few hours ago.

Here were Derwentwater and Lowdore; here were the famed Lowdore Falls, which I went a little out of my way to see. Why should I not enjoy myself with so many hours before me? To-morrow Mrs. Zitman would be confronting me, and, if Wenford spoke truth, worrying me. Tush! why should I care for worry?—what was Mr. Wenford's definition of worry? Was he not a man whose temper a straw would ruffle, and was not I a patient uncomplaining mortal? There was a difference in our ideas of things. I felt that, with my premium in my pocket, I could endure a deal of harass from the money. Certainly it would vex me if Mrs. Zitman interfered too much with my plans—but I had a hope that my powers of elocution would shake the wisdom of her suggestions. I should like the new Nettlewood house built in its entirety—"my house," as I had planned it when the advertisement first set me struggling for the prize. In Borrowdale Vale, and walking a good four miles an hour, not exciting myself by over-fatigue, but pushing on at a fair pace, and keeping my eyes open as to the beauty of the views around me. To hasten on my story, and not grow as prolix as a guide-book, finally, at four in the afternoon beyond the Vale, and at the entrance to the Black Gap. I found the spot without any difficulty; across a damp meadow or two towards a pile of hills in the corner—the map was one that could be trusted, or I was more than ordinarily clear-sighted. There was the Black Gap, a lone hill between two taller ones—there went the path such as it was, over the first green slope.

There was a cottage at the foot of the hill, and a boy swinging

himself on a rickety gate. For mere ceremony's sake, I pointed with my stick to the path ahead of me.

"Black Gap?" I inquired.

"E'es."

"How far to Nettlewood?"

"Doan't knoa."

An old woman, awakened to life by my shouting, made her appearance at the doorway, and stood shading her eyes with her hand and looking towards me.

I repeated the latter inquiry to the ancient dame.

"Seven miles or eight, sir, if you know your way."

"It's easy to find, I should think."

"I never found any difficulty myself. It's easy on a fine day, sir."

"That is the Gap, I suppose?"

"That is the White Gap, leading to the Black Gap—straight as you can go, sir. There's a gentleman ahead of you, if you can overtake him."

"Thank you."

I started up the path, a stony sheep-track, somewhat surprised to find the grass so moist in these parts. There must have been rain here within the last two hours, I fancied. I made no effort to overtake the "gentleman ahead;" I preferred my own company, my own quiet enjoyment of all that was passing around me. I had walked ten miles at least, without experiencing the least fatigue; I was good for the other seven or eight, as though I had just begun my morning's walk. The evenings were light till half-past eight o'clock; I should be in Nettlewood long before the daylight flitted away behind the range of mountains. I scaled the first hill, and found another beyond it, shut in, as it were, between two taller hills or mountains—this was the White Gap, evidently. The path became rather less distinct; once or twice ended abruptly in grass, and began again fifty yards in advance. It was a long, uphill progress to the top, but I was rewarded by looking back at the valley beyond, and the fair expanse of landscape stretching out before me. The cottage at which I had inquired was a speck in the vale below; there was a stiff breeze the high land whereon I stood and looked about me—there were some flying clouds coming up over the third hill, which had appeared before me when the second was surmounted.

The flying clouds trooped over the hill with remarkable celerity; when I set my face towards the whole route, they seemed coming down the hill to meet me, and hiding its summit in a vale of mist. Then, presto! there was a full charge at me; the mist and clouds were driven on me by the wind, the rain came pattering down in heavy drops, the path became dim and indistinct, then vanished altogether—I was shut in on the mountain-path, and getting wet through rapidly.

I imagined that the mist would soon clear off if the wind continued so I plodded along carelessly, and was rewarded for my perseverance by a break of sunshine—finally, by the hill top becoming once again perceptible. I set forth, then, at a brisker pace; the advantages of society began to suggest themselves; I had not so much confidence in my own powers of perspicacity. If I could overtake the stranger journeying in the same direction as myself, so much the better. The path was very faintly traced now—presently I felt convinced it would soon cease altogether.

The third hill, a sudden dip in the land almost to a valley, and then a fourth hill looking unpleasantly grim and stony. Save the sougling of the wind between the hills—a curious murmur, as of some one in pain, it seemed—all still and solemn and depressing, and no one ahead of me yet. Toiling up the fourth hill, whereon to my satisfaction, the path appeared more strongly marked, and then met again by mist and rain and heavy banks of cloud—suddenly blinded for a while by the flash of lightning which darted past me, and lit up the mountains. When the thunder followed this, and seemed leaping from one hill to another, and rolling itself down them, I sat down, under cover of a huge friendly boulder, and began to shiver. Kennington Road appeared very lovely in the distance then, and Cumberland scenery fell to a discount. Nothing like the bustling London streets where there was ever life, and comfortable faces, and one could ask the way and find it too!

The rain continued, and I was getting wet through wondrously fast; I was inclined to collapse with cold, and inaction—I had heard of such cases—might be death. On to Nettlewood with a dash, irrespective of the storm—on over the hill, fighting my way to a friendly shelter. The rain kept on, but the storm abated somewhat; the sky became less dense, and I could still keep the path in sight. The path had transformed itself into a rivulet by this time, and it was not difficult to follow if I kept ankle deep in water.

The fourth hill was ascended and decended; half-way down I caught sight of a green valley beneath, with a river meandering through its midst. Three-quarters of the descent, and I became aware of some one toiling up the path to meet me. It was a pleasant sight to encounter a human being then, and I hastened downwards in better spirits. Five minutes afterwards I recognised Mr. Wenford.

"Go back! go back!" he shouted, when within hearing distance, "the river is too deep to ford, and there are fifty thousand devils in the Black Gap yonder. This is a cursed fool's trick of your's and mine."

When we were face to face I said,

"I was not aware that you intended to pursue this route."

"Your confounded nonsense put it in my head. I was tired of horse-riding, and inclined to try the Gaps for the first time in my life. I have tried everything, and the idea rather pleased me. Turn

back, man, and put your best leg foremost before the storm gathers again."

"How many miles is it to Nettlewood by the Black Gap, sir?"

"Three."

"And I have come four. It will be folly to turn back."

"And madness to go on."

"I shall go on."

"The devil you will!"

He looked at me with an admiring glance; my resolution to proceed appeared to excite him.

"You don't look made to stand against much fatigue—have you the courage to try the Black Gap in this weather?"

"I must get on. It's not a question of courage. I pledged my word to see Mrs. Zitman early to-morrow morning."

"Oh! you're a man of your word," he said, with a sneer.

"I hope so."

"And you won't turn back?"

"No."

"Then I'll go with you. If any man can struggle on to Nettlewood, I can. And it's not pleasant to be alone in the mountains. Come on, Mr. Gear—this is a match of strength between you and me. No mercy to the man who drops dead-beat on the road."

He turned, and went on down the hill-side, I following him. Slipping at every step, we found ourselves at last in the valley, and by the side of the rushing river, a river of some sixteen or twenty feet across, it proved to be when I was standing by its margin, watching its rapid current and its fretful dash over the great stones with which it was studded.

"This balked me," said Wenford; "I did not care to cross and get wet to my waist without an admiring audience—it was awfully slow work here alone. But now forward!"

He coolly waded into the water, without exercising much judgment of selection and fought his way across. Time was everything, and I imitated his example at once, seeking the assistance of a stepping-stone here and there, and not presenting on the opposite side an object quite so deplorable as himself.

A steady rain was falling now, the thunder was muttering itself away amongst the distant hills but the daylight was becoming fainter every instant.

"There is the Black Gap," said Wenford, with a grim smile, pointing to a dark mass of mountains in advance of us.

"Do you see the path?"

"Devil a bit of path will there be found up there. It's as straight as you can go, and if you don't go straight it's over the fells to the bottom, or ten miles out of your way, as the case may be. At all events, it's up there, I believe. I begin to like this style of thing now, Mr. Gear."

"Do you?"

"I wish the lightning would come back to enhance the effect, or the night suddenly fall upon us, and wrap us in it. There would be something more to boast of, then."

"I'm satisfied with the present gloomy state of things."

We were ascending the Gap, and soon had but little breath left to spare in conversation. The mountain was rugged and steep, and it became sheer climbing after a while. Presently Mr. Wenford fell, and gathered himself up with an oath, and looked round to see if I were going to fall also. I disappointed him at this juncture, but a hundred yards further on I came heavily on my chest and Wenford took that opportunity to laugh long and heartily.

Still we toiled and struggled forwards, the rain coming down more steadily, and the light in the west becoming fainter every instant. Wenford would have part of his unnatural wish—we should have the night upon us in the Black Gap, at all events.

"Are you wet through, Gear?" he called over.

"Oh! yes—some time ago."

"What do you think of the Cumberland Fells?"

"Pleasant places after dark, and in damp weather. How far do you think we are from Nettlewood now?"

"I don't know—I don't care," he shouted back at me.

This was a singular man, at all events; he had a fair claim to being considered Mad Wenford, I allowed. Far from a pleasant companion, as he had proved yesterday, he was infinitely less to be preferred that day. Deliberating on the matter, as I toiled and stumbled along, I arrived at the conclusion that after all I should have preferred his room to his company even in the chaotic wilderness of rock-work wherein I groped my way.

There was a rivalry between our powers of endurance, and the man's manner secretly began to aggravate me. He was a boaster and a braggart, I felt assured: he was proud of his animal strength, and the opportunity of testing it, to my disadvantage—my intention to proceed had annoyed him and I felt in my heart that he had only exposed himself to this unnecessary fatigue in order that he might have a chance to laugh at my discomfiture. And until I dropped, I thought, I would struggle on with him, and prove myself as good a man. I was half dead with fatigue by that time, but my courage was high still. I toiled on and asked no questions, but followed in his wake, wondering when the eternal mountain ascent would be over, and secretly anathematising it, and the blinding rain that rendered all so indistinct.

The night settled at last amongst the Fells—in the darkness I could scarcely see him—a little way ahead I could hear him stumbling along.

"I don't know where we are," he called out once; I think we have lost our way."

My heart sunk awfully, but I answered :

"Never mind; we must get to the top if we keep on."

"And get to the bottom, too, if we don't look devilish sharp," he muttered.

Losing sight of him so often, I did not study his route so much, but toiled upwards on my own account. After awhile I lost him altogether, and fancied that during the rest of the way I should be left to my own resources, when he turned up again suddenly, some twenty feet below me.

"Hollo! are you ahead there, Gear?"

"Yes."

"I have had another fall, and have been admiring the landscape on my back for a minute or two. I'd give something for some brandy here."

I had too little breath to waste, and merely answered him by a monosyllabic grunt. I felt that if we had come the wrong way, I must drop shortly, and let him go by me, merciless and cruel, as I felt he would be. We were in a dense vapour now, and the ground beneath our feet rose less precipitous—finally became level.

I paused, and waited for him to join me.

"We are at the top!" I panted.

He stood by the side of me, and struggled with his breath for a moment, I envied him the facility with which he came round.

"Yes, we are at the top," he said; "which way?"

"Downwards," I answered.

"*Facile est, &c.*—do you agree with me?"

"Hardly."

"Let me think now," said he; "I have come as far as here, Nettlewood way with my gun—I may help you now, if you'll thank me for it."

"Certainly I will."

"You have shown yourself a plucky fellow, and I like men of pluck all the world over. I thought you a fool yesterday."

"Thank you for your good opinion."

"And I hate fools, as fools hate me. But I like a strong man, with the power in himself to brave difficulties—fight his way through them, and go on unswervingly, and in the face of danger, to the object in view far away there. That's the man I like, and will call friend, be he a poor devil of an architect or not. Gear," suddenly clapping his heavy hand on my shoulder, "I call you my friend for your courage. There are not two men living save ourselves who would have attempted the Black Gap to-night. They won't believe in Nettlewood that we have ever done it—damn their incredulity!"

"But we haven't done it yet."

"I think we are right enough. Let us sit down here and listen."

"Listen for what?"

"For the Ferry bell. Those who come by the Black Gap, or the

bridle road that runs by the Lake, must pull the bell hanging by the post, this side of the water. It must be past eight, and there are the miners and quarrymen reaching their journey's end now.

He sat down composedly, and I was glad to imitate his example, miserable as was our position, and uncongenial as was the place we had chosen.

"Here!" he said, a moment afterwards, and thrust a brandy-flask into my hand.

I took it with an ejaculation of surprise. He gave vent to one of his boisterous laughs at my astonishment.

"I have been testing the thorough-bred to the utmost," he said, "and he's fought his way in first-rate style. Backed by brandy taken on the sly, I could scarcely keep your match. Drink, man!"

Under any other circumstances I might have felt inclined to hurl the brandy-flask at him, but there was the iciness of death in my veins, and in the fire-water was life and animation, which I dared not refuse. I drank a part of the brandy, and felt ready to proceed again.

"Keep still and listen," he said, when I expressed a wish to renew our journey.

He had hardly spoken when the faint tingle of a bell was borne to our ears. Wenford sprang to his feet with a shout.

"We're right! Turn to the left, and then go downwards gently. Hip! hip! hurrah! for Nettlewood!"

He led the way now, and I followed at his heels. He knew the route perfectly, as though it were broad daylight, and the weather were fine. We commenced a long wearisome descent, which seemed as though it would never end.

"You and I were sitting on the brink of a precipice overhanging Nettlewood a moment since," he said; "half a mile only to the bottom that way—two miles this."

"Two miles now!" I exclaimed.

He did not heed my inquiry.

"Fancy if I had owed you a grudge, now, what a clean thrust to the bottom it might have been, and never a soul the wiser. A Cumberland jury bringing in a verdict of 'Accidental Death, caused by foolhardiness in attempting the Black Gap in a storm.' I alone in the secret of your hasty exit from the troubles of this life."

"It's a grim thought, Mr. Wenford."

"Ay!—it is."

We descended together at a rapid pace. I could trace the path for several feet in advance in the darkness less intense. We went on manfully now; in half-an-hour's time or less we were on level ground again. A piece of water, swollen like that solitary stream we had crossed between the Gaps, spread out before us on our left. Across it I fancied I could detect a dark sweep of meadow land, a

house-roof here and there, a flock or two of fire from cottage windows.

Wenford approached a tall white post, erected by the river's side. A rope was attached to it, and he pulled vigorously, making the bell above our heads jar discordantly in the night air.

"This is Nettlewood Ferry, Mr. Gear," he said.



CHAPTER III.

LETTY RAY.

It was cold work standing in our wet garments, with the wind and rain swooping at us ; Mr. Wenford stamped about the wet grass, and cursed the tardy progress of the boat across the stream.

"I'll give them Wenford's ring," he said at last, and proceeded to keep up one continued discordant clanging of the bell above our heads until the keel of the ferryman's boat grated on the pebbly strand.

"Good day t'ye, Mr. Wenford," said the man in the boat.

"You didn't expect to ferry Mad Wenford over to-night, Jabez?"

"Noa, noa."

"This gentleman and I have come by way of the Black Gap."

"Noa?" said the man in inquiring astonishment.

"Didn't I tell you," turning to me, "that they wouldn't believe us in these parts? A set of idiots, with heads three times as thick as ever baboons were endowed with!"

He sprang into the boat, and I imitated his example. We had put off from the land when a female figure came hurrying to the water's brink.

"Stay a moment, Jabez."

"Stay for no one, man! We shall die with cold!" cried Wenford.

But Jabez, like a man of business who did not care to be too often at ferry work that particular evening, put back, and I stood up in the boat with my hand extended to assist the female to enter. She had passed me and Wenford, and was sitting at the back of Jabez, before my courtesy was of any avail.

Wenford looked hard at her, shaded his eyes with his hand, and attempted to more accurately define the face and figure of the woman shrouded in her thick plaid shawl.

"Letty Ray," he said at last.

"Well?" was the short response.

"You haven't been following us through the Black Gap, you jade?"

"I'm not a mad-woman."

"Where have you been on a night like this, I wonder?"

"Wonder on, Mr. Wenford," was the reply.

"Sweethearting, for a five-pound note. There is nothing on earth, or under the earth, to keep you women from your lovers."

"But are there any lovers bold enough to venture forth to meet their women? You men are such cowards."

"No one ever called Ned Wenford a coward," he said, quickly.

The girl laughed in rather an irritating manner. Wenford sat and scowled at the shawled figure before him. I anticipated one of those volleys of abuse in which he had heretofore distinguished himself, but was happily disappointed for the nonce.

"You and I never did run our horses' heads together comfortably, Letty. When you were not teasing me, I was teasing you. Heavens! do you remember the last quarrel we had in the Spring?"

"I did not quarrel," was the reply.

"Oh! no—you only made me a little nervous about my life for the rest of the day. Well, Letty, where *have* you been to-night?"

"Ask no questions, and you'll hear no——"

"Lies," added he, "right you are, my fair maid of the ferry. How's the old woman?"

"Who?"

"The old woman—materfamilias, with the death's head, and cross-bones. Ugh! but she's an ogress!"

"Stop there!—stop that!" cried the girl in an excited manner.

It was Wenford's turn to aggravate, and he began at once. He never did like that old woman, a cross-grained, ill-tempered being whom he hated like poison, and who hated him, as she did all humanity. He could wager fifty pounds that she was scouring the elements cross-legged on a broom stick to-night—this was a night congenial to evil spirits. The listener for whom these remarks were particularly intended, had recovered her composure, however. I saw that she shrugged her shoulders once under the shawl, and resigned herself to the infliction—such as it was; I believe she even forgot all about it and him, for when the boat reached the other side, by the light glimmering through the casement of a house contiguous to the water's edge, I could see that there was a very thoughtful face—a very handsome face, too—visible under the heavy folds which draped it.

We paid our fare to the man Jabez, and went at once into the house—the Ferry Inn at Nettlewood.

Mr. Wenford stamped his way along a tiled passage towards a

large, low-ceilinged room, half parlour, half kitchen, at the extremity, shouting for Mrs. Ray at every step. Mrs. Ray, however, did not condescend to respond, although she was found, sitting in a stiff, straight-backed chair before the fire, spreading two thin hands before the blaze.

She looked round as we entered, and Wenford's previous allusions to that lady forcibly recurred to me. Although not "materfamilias with the death's head and cross-bones," hers was a ghastly face enough. A cold, white face, whereon the cheek-bones were unnaturally prominent, and the thin nose uncommonly like an eagle's beak. An unhealthy face—the face of a woman who had suffered much pain, and experienced much sickness for many years—a woman more thin, and angular, and fragile, I had never seen begging bread in London streets.

"You're making noise enough to-night, Mr. Wenford," she said, quietly.

"Offer prayers to-night, old woman, that there's enough breath left in me to make a noise with. I've come over the Black Gap in the storm."

"It must have been bad walking," quietly observed the old lady.

"It was nearly bad dying, mother Ray," he affirmed with an oath; "these people," turning to me, "don't think much of our adventures—curse their impudence! Where's Letty gone?"

"Here she is—what do you want with her?"

Letty Ray had entered the room whilst he was speaking; instinctively I glanced towards her. A girl of twenty years of age apparently—a dark girl, with a mass of raven hair gathered loosely round her head. To many tastes, a girl with considerable pretension to beauty, having an olive skin, a rich colour on her cheeks, large dark eyes full of fire, a well-formed nose and mouth, a well-made, if somewhat slight figure. For one occupying so low a position, evidently a proud girl, and carrying her head on her shoulders like a duchess. There was a contemptuous expression on her countenance, which possibly gave me that impression at the time—the appearance of Mr. Wenford in her mother's house certainly not conducing to any extra amiability just then. She was plainly dressed—poorly clad it might be said without much exaggeration—wearing on her feet the thick-soled Cumberland boots made to stand all weathers. But she moved lightly enough in these heavy appendages, and there was a singular grace in her movements which attracted immediate attention. If she were not a perfect beauty, she was at least a girl about whom it struck you at once that there was something remarkable. She crossed to the side of the fire, and took up her position with one hand upon the high mantelpiece, looking, as she stood there with that defiant, disdainful expression, the defender of her mother against the coarse and ungallant attacks of Mr. Wenford.

"I want brandy," said Wenford, in answer to her former inquiry, "or anything to keep my marrow from freezing."

"And your friend?"

"Brandy too, to be sure. Look sharp, girl, look sharp! Don't stand there sneering at us, as if we weren't worthy of being attended to."

Letty left the room for the requisite stimulant, and Mr. Wenford drew a high stool towards the fire, taking up his position in amiable conjunction to the old lady.

"Your daughter is too lofty for her station, Mrs. Ray," he said; "what's the matter with her?"

"I don't know. I've too many ailments of my own to be a-studying *her* whims," was the selfish response.

"She's dreaming of the fortune that will never come to her, mother," he said.

The old woman clasped her thin hands together, and her white face assumed a look of intense interest.

"I don't know that—I don't know that!"

"Do you think there's madness in the people at Nettlewood House?"

"I know what I think, bully Wenford."

"Hollo! that's an ugly name, that my godfathers and godmothers never gave me," he cried; "where did you pick that up?"

"I have heard it scores of times—ever since you horsewhipped the wrong man for frightening your mare."

"They're cursedly free about here—I shall have to stop this."

The old lady smiled placidly at the fire, and began to warm her hands again; the look of interest on that parchment countenance died out completely.

"You know what you think, mother Ray do you?" he said, reverting to her former remark; "do you know what I think?"

"No."

"That you'll die in poverty, and that I and other respectable rate-payers will be at the expense of your funeral."

Mrs. Ray laughed at this—it was an unearthly croak of satisfaction, for which I could scarcely account.

"People are wise now-a-days, and don't marry for love," he said; "*some people*, I know, never intend to marry again, Mrs. Ray."

"You're a mocking devil," cried the woman, with a sudden snarl; "why do you come here to taunt an old sick woman? If it's the truth—which it may be, but which can't be helped—why do you come here to hiss at me, and remind me of all which beggared me and mine?"

"Let him taunt, mother," said the voice of Letty behind us, "his has been a life of reviling—can we expect him to spare *us*? Let him and his friend drink their brandy and begone—their custom is not

wanted, when an insult is brought with it—the Ferry Inn will exist without their patronage.”

“Bravo, Letty, bravo! Here’s your very good health, my dear. Mrs. Ray,” with a meaning nod in her direction, “*good fortune to you.*”

“Ugh!” was the only response.

I had been waiting my time to defend myself; I broke in here.

“Pray acquit me, Miss Ray, of any intention to insult you or your mother. I am a stranger to all in the house—to all in Cumberland. Seeing that this is the first time that I have opened my lips, I trust I may be exonerated from any rudeness to those whose friendly roof is sheltering us.”

The girl looked at me steadily.

“I beg your pardon,” she said at last.

“What is your game, Gear,” inquired Wenford, that you sing so small all of a sudden? Do you think these people worth apologizing to?”

“If I have offended them—certainly.”

“There is nothing to be got here but bad brandy, and bad accommodation for man and beast. By all that’s holy I’ll build a new house here in opposition, for there’s nothing fit for human beings to be found in this den. You’ve had it all your own way too long, mother Ray!”

“Oh! we’ve had all the custom of these parts, mind you. It’s the only inn in Nettlewood—we’re a-growing rich, Letty and I,” said the old woman, satirically.

“Come on, Gear—don’t stop here. I’ve a spare room for a bachelor friend in my house. I’ll treat you like a prince.”

“Thank you; but I am too fatigued to proceed farther, had I even a claim upon your hospitality. If Mrs. Ray will kindly provide me with a bed-room for the night, I shall feel obliged.”

“We’ve excellent rooms, sir,” said the old lady, with a sudden eye to business; “our charges are not high, and everything is as clean as a new pin. Perhaps you would like to see the room at once?”

“Thank you; and if you could contrive to favour me with a change of clothes——”

“You don’t mind what clothes on a pinch, I suppose?”

“Oh! no. But I want these well dried by the morning. I have a visit to pay.”

Wenford laughed very heartily at this. Mrs. Ray looked suspiciously from him to me.

“You’re an odd fish,” he said to me; “I can’t make you out just yet. And you will not come on to ‘The Larches?’”

“I must ask you to excuse me, sir. My position does not warrant me in becoming your guest, Mr. Wenford.”

“Well, if you won’t come, you must leave it alone.”

He pulled his French cap—which he had not removed—still more firmly over his head, tossed off the rest of his brandy, and marched out of the house without another word. My rejection of his hospitality had vexed him, and he evinced it by his unceremonious departure.

He had no sooner quitted the house, when Mrs. Ray broke into a shivering fit. She sat in her high-backed chair, and rattled away like a dice-box. Her bones must have rattled as well as her teeth, to make so unearthly a clatter. Letty Ray caught up my own untasted brandy, and poured it down her mother's throat.

"Have you let that fool offend you?" she asked contemptuously.

"He always upsets me when he talks like that," she gasped.

"He was always a brute—why should we care about his ravings?"

"He's been speaking of the money."

"Always of the money—you! It will drive you to the grave—that foolish and vain thought!"

"Not vain, Letty—not quite vain, girl!"

"Hush!" with a look towards me.

"It mayn't come true," she said, without heeding her daughter, "but it's so precious near the truth! Only a woman's whim—a young woman's—between this life and a life of comfort, such as we have never known. Only a woman's whim!"

"Would you like me to show you to your room, sir?" Letty asked.

"If you please."

She snatched up the candle that had been glimmering on the table, and led the way from the room up a broad flight of stairs, to the first landing, on which an immense eight-day clock was ticking in a sepulchral fashion. Opening the door of the first room we approached, she said:

"This is your room, sir. We will send up a change of clothes in a minute."

She placed the candlestick in my hand, and went hurriedly downstairs to rejoin her mother, concerning whose powers of self-command she was evidently in doubt.

A moment or two afterwards the man Jabez knocked at my room door.

"Here be your change of clothes, sir," he said; "is there anything wanted to be got ready doonstairs?"

This reminded me of "the dinner long delayed," and I gave orders at once for anything of a substantial character that might be in the house.

"You *did* come over the Black Gap then, sir?"

"To be sure. Did you not believe Mr. Wenford?"

"Oh! there be maun few folks to believe him, sir," was the answer; "I'll put the clothes down here, sir—I hope they'll fit. We keeps a few sizes on hand, for people who come the Black Gap way to Nettlewood."

Jabez departed, and left me at last the opportunity desired of getting rid of my wet habiliments. Jabez came to my door a moment afterwards, bearing on a tray another glass of brandy, to replace that which Letty Ray had borrowed for her mother's infirmities. When I took my way downstairs again I found the cloth laid in the room I had previously quitted, and a dish of hot mutton chops awaiting me.

"We have been trying to light a fire in the best room," said old Mrs. Ray, apologetically, "but the wet comes down the chimbley so, and mayhap you'd had found it cold and comfortless to-night. P'raps you'll put up with the old woman, and the old woman's room for once, sir—there's warmth here in the peat, at any rate,"

"This will do very nicely."

"If you're inclined to make a stay of it—and there's no other inn, mind, anywhere's about—we'll have all things tidy by to-morrow. We don't charge high here—I think I told you before?"

"I am not afraid that you will tax me too highly for your kindness."

"You're a civil-spoken young man," she said, turning her white face towards me, with a certain degree of interest; "you and Wenford must have made an odd pair in the Black Gap. I wish to the Lord he'd broken his neck there, and never have troubled honest people again. I'd be glad to see that man comfortably tucked up in his coffin."

She did not express this unamiable sentiment with any degree of vindictiveness, only in a rambling, desultory way. If she had said that she would be glad to hear that it was a fine day to-morrow, she could not have spoken in a manner less concerned. It was simply the expression of what she considered "good hearing," as brother Joseph might have phrased it.

During the consumption of my meal, Letty fitted in and out, keeping her mother's loquacity somewhat in check, I fancied. The old lady was inclined to be communicative, but the daughter evidently distrusted the topics which Mrs. Ray might be inclined to dwell upon.

"The gentleman will not care about that," or, "There's no need to trouble the gentleman with that, mother," brought the lady up so often, that she finally turned sulky, and sat facing the fire with her thin hands spread out towards the flame.

Suddenly, before the merits of the last mutton chop had been sufficiently discussed, a sudden report—like the discharge of a whole park of artillery—rang out in the night air, woke up a thousand echoes in the mountain, set the dogs barking in the fragmentary village round about the Ferry Inn.

Mrs. Ray executed a galvanic leap in the air, and came down again with the back of her head against the round knobs with which her chair was ornamented.

"There's that wretch again!" said Letty, suddenly.

"I—I hope he's blown his ugly self to atoms!" was the fervent wish of the old lady.

"May I inquire what that means?" I asked, with some curiosity.

"It's one of the Wenford whims," said Letty; "the man at 'The Larches' always fires the cannon on his lawn to announce his despicable presence home."

"An extraordinary whim, certainly!"

"It'll bust some day!—it'll bust some day!" muttered Mrs. Ray, placidly rubbing one hand over the other.

"Hark!" said Letty.

She held up her hand to enjoin attention, but I heard nothing—or rather there were a hundred noises in my ears of falling rain, of the flapping branches of trees against the window facing me,—of the wind, and the deep baying still of the Nettlewood dogs.

"It's no good asking me to hark this half hour," said the mother.

"Keep silent, then."

"What's the matter?"

"A carriage on the high road—coming towards the Ferry here."

"It's that wretch coming back, or Mrs. Zitman taking one of her mad rides to-night."

I could hear the roll of wheels plainly then. Letty Ray went swiftly out of the room. The old woman, not unmoved by the news, called out, "Light the best room!—light the best room!" an injunction which her daughter did not profess to hear.

The carriage advanced at a rapid pace—in a few moments the wheels were grating in the roadway before the house.

Mrs. Ray sat with her head over her shoulder, intently watching the shadowy doorway behind her—her fixed stony gaze ahead curdled my blood a little.

Finally, there were voices in the passage—Letty Ray and another's.

"She won't show her in the best room, the jade!" muttered Mrs. Ray.

Letty entered the room, followed by a young lady of two or three and twenty years of age—a lady with a pale and earnest face, shaded by a felt cavalier-like hat.

"Mrs. Zitman wishes to speak with you, sir," said the landlady's daughter.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. ZITMAN.

I NEED not say that I sprang to my feet in dismay, and glared at Mrs. Zitman as at a Cumberland Fetch. I had been so little prepared to meet my patroness that night, and so much less prepared to find in her a young and graceful woman. I remembered on the instant the mendacity of Mr. Wenford—his fancy sketch of my patroness in the railway carriage recurred to me most vividly. If my amazement were also powerfully developed, no less was surprise, even consternation, visible on the delicate features of the lady standing before me. I had no doubt that some one had been equally explanatory concerning myself—I had little doubt who was the gentleman who had taken so much pains to embarrass both herself and me.

She was a woman with a child-like face, which study or anxiety had rendered pale and delicate. Below the middle height of a woman—less by half a-head in height than Letty Ray, by whose side she was standing at the moment. The broad-brimmed felt hat cast perhaps a shadow on the face that was not always there, and the black feather drooping therefrom gave a sombreness and heaviness to her general appearance. Her figure was draped in the thick folds of a Cashmere shawl, which almost entirely covered the rich black silk dress she wore beneath.

This was Mrs. Zitman, the patroness of forlorn architects—the friend in need to Canute Gear.

And I, Canute Gear, the architect, who had gained the winning prize, stood there before her covered with confusion; in all my life I had never felt so heartily ashamed of myself and my appearance. I had laughed a little at my *tout ensemble* when I was fully equipped in the spare clothes kept in stock at the Ferry Inn; now the blood rushed to my face with the consciousness of the sorry figure that I was representing. The clothes of the unknown did not fit me; he had evidently been much shorter and stouter than myself—between the bottom of my trousers and my carpet slippers were at least fifteen inches of grey socks darned in many places, and from my waistcoat downwards was a horrible and unnatural bagginess. And that waistcoat consisted of forget-me-nots and roses on a white worsted ground—Jabez's Sunday best, I was perfectly assured—whilst the coat, a dress coat, fitted me so tightly, that, as I bowed to Mrs. Zitman, it cracked in many places. Grave as her face was upon

entering the room, I perceived, after a moment or two, the delicate muscles relax, and the full keen grey eyes sparkle with suppressed merriment. She pressed her lips, and even bit them, after my clumsy bow—which had been made with a fork in my hand, I ascertained immediately afterwards—finally, she broke into a rippling silvery laugh, that was pleasant to hear, though I stood there the unfortunate object at which it was directed.

"You will forgive me, Mr. Gear, but I am a little startled out of my usual composure," she said, colouring at the hilarity which she had herself betrayed; "I have been led to expect a—a different gentleman."

"I have been deceived myself, madam, trusting too implicitly in a few details afforded me by Mr. Wenford."

"I thought so," she answered.

"I trust Mrs. Zitman will excuse my unarchitectural costume this evening—having been caught in a storm earlier in the day, I have been glad to avail myself of the garments that were handy here."

I was not going to allow it to appear that "motley *was* my only wear." Old-fashioned as I might be, and little regard for appearances as I had always had, *that* would not do, after Mrs. Zitman's laugh at my masquerade attire.

"I thought I recognised Jabez's vest," she said to Letty, and both laughed this time, as well they might. Looking down at that worsted flower-garden—the proprietorship of which I had guessed by foreknowledge—I could afford to let them laugh, and even laugh myself at the absurdity.

"Won't the lady take a seat, said Mrs. Ray, at this juncture, 'won't the lady like to be shown into the best room with Mr. — Mr. —'"

"Gear," added Letty, who had long since mastered the name.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Ray," responded Mrs. Zitman, "this is a mere flying visit, to bid Mr. Gear welcome to Nettlewood. Mr. Wenford called at Nettlewood House, to apprise me of your arrival, and I—I thought that I should be deficient in courtesy if I did not hasten here to see you.

She spoke hurriedly and in an embarrassed manner. I had no doubt that she had expected to see a white-haired old gentleman with one foot and a half in his grave. Certainly not a young man with nankeen trousers up to his knees.

"I am indebted to your attentions, madam, although I could have wished that the visit had been deferred."

"It matters little," said she, more gravely, "I am glad that you have come—I shall be glad to see you at my house on Thursday."

"Thursday," I repeated.

"My brother does not return till to-morrow—he has been absent in town some weeks—I have no doubt that he will be anxious to

confer with you and me, concerning these building plans of yours. That day will suit you, I trust?"

"Thursday will suit me very well indeed, Mrs. Zitman."

"I don't think I have anything more to say just now—oh! the cheque. It is not written out, but if—if you will accept, or require a few pounds on account—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Zitman, but I would prefer waiting your convenience."

Those abominable nankeens and that disgusting dress-coat had suggested the idea that my fortunes were at a low ebb—I assumed quite an air of dignity, in order to counteract the impression created.

"Then I hope to see you on Thursday morning, Mr. Gear," she said, and turned towards the fire, whereat good Mrs. Ray was still warming her hands. Letty Ray immediately cleared the table, in obedience to my pantomimic signal.

"Well, Mrs. Ray, how has the easterly wind affected you?" Mrs. Zitman asked.

"Poorly, my lady, poorly," in a feeble whine; "easterly or westerly does not make much difference now. It's all down hill now to the workus and workus funeral."

"Not so bad as that—it never can be so bad as that."

"Ah! but it will be!"

"You who know me, should have better thoughts than that."

"We're very poor, my lady."

"Haven't I told you always to ask when you are in need. Has my heart or my purse been ever shut against you?"

"You've been my very good angel, but the calls on us are many, and trade's been wuss than usual. Only to-night that Wenford taunted me with a paupers funeral, and the thought's been worriting me ever since. Rot him!" she muttered.

"If you require help, tell me," said Mrs. Zitman, with an animation that brought the colour to her cheeks, and made her very beautiful; "what am I wasting my life here for, do you think?"

"I don't like always to be asking," whined Mrs. Ray; "your brother, Mr. Vaughan, thinks I beg too often, and that your charity is thrown away on your dead husband's sister."

"Mrs. Zitman had drawn forth her purse, and was idling with its golden rings—Mrs. Ray was leering at the process from the corners of her eyes.

"You need never want, Mrs. Ray," she murmured.

She was opening her purse when Letty re-entered. Forgetful of my presence, and the respect due to her grand guest, she stepped between her mother's chair and Mrs. Zitman, and pushed the purse back rudely.

"We do not want money, Mrs. Zitman," she cried, passionately; "we're not in need—we have money put by—pounds and pounds!"

When we are starving, we Rays may come to you and ask your help, but not before. Don't be hard upon us with your charity!"

Mrs. Zitman put back her purse, quietly regarding the excited girl meanwhile.

"Your mother's manner led me to believe that a little assistance might be welcome, Letty."

"It was a mistake. Please think it a mistake?"

Mrs. Zitman bowed in acquiescence, and moved away from the mantelpiece. I was preparing to beat a hasty retreat, when she said, "Don't let me disturb you, Mr. Gear," and swept rapidly past me down the passage. Before I could follow her and open her carriage door, she had entered the carriage, and it was rattling away in the rain down the country road.

I stood at the door of the Ferry Inn for a moment or two, but the prospect was a blank, the sign-board above my head creaked ominously, and the wind drove the rain in on me. I closed the door and returned to the warm sitting-room of Mrs. Ray.

Mother and daughter were quarrelling as I entered; the money question had been mooted in my absence, and Mrs. Ray had expressed a forcible opinion on the untimely interference of her daughter.

"She's a rich woman, and would never have missed a pound or two," I heard her say.

"I will not have this constant begging of the Zitman's—this false cry of help to them. It degrades us!"

"How proud we are! Vanity and pride have brought many a fool like you to ruin!"

"Hold your tongue, mother. Here's the stranger coming."

"Don't bid me hold my tongue, you hussy!" grumbled the mother; "I'm old and weak, but I can't bear impudence yet. If the lower half of me is nearly dead, my feelings isn't."

"I will try to bear with you—I will do my best," the daughter murmured.

She dropped a foot-stool by her mother's side, clutched her chin with one large but well-formed hand, and looked steadily at the peat fire. The mother began to spread out her own withered hands to the blaze once more.

There was a long silence. I walked to a few book-shelves slung over a small sideboard, and took down one by one, the few ill-bound, dog's-eared volumes they contained. A strange medley of literature was there! Old histories of England, hymn books, psalm books, bibles, some bound penny members of stories that had been published, read and forgotten twenty years ago—the fate of three-fourths of men's attempts to lure the world in its leisure moments—a fate at which I shall not repine. There are fixed and shooting stars on earth as in heaven—I, Canute Gear, architect, don't expect a host of satellites revolving round *me*.

I took down one of these volumes of abstruse romances—years ago I could remember subscribing to a similar story, and going to bed once a week with my hair perpendicular with horror. Fashions in literature had changed since then with other fashions, and “Varney the Vampire” had gone down the stream of time unregretted and unasked for. It was odd reading, but it amused me that night; it brought back the old day’s before my brother Joseph’s bankruptcy—the picture of a bullet-headed boy reading his penny-worth of horrors surreptitiously behind the slate, whereon he was supposed to be working his school sums for the morrow. I was thinking more of the old times than the story, though I turned page after page without skipping a line, when Mrs. Ray’s peculiar voice brought me back to life at the Nettlewood inn.

“You can have anything you like to order, mind you, sir,” she suggested; “There is good stuff kept here.”

I took Mrs. Ray’s hint.

“Thank you. I think I should like to test the qualities of the Cumberland ales.”

I had taken tea with my dinner, it may be premised.

“Letty, the gentleman will take some ale,” she said.

“Jabez is in the house,” replied Letty, absently.

“Jabez!” screamed Mrs. Ray.

That young man appeared, received his commission, presently returned with the mug of ale which I had ordered. He looked with some anxiety at his Sunday vest as he laid the tray on the table; a suspicion that I might have greased it at dinner was haunting his mind.

By way of politeness I took the liberty of wishing Mrs. Ray and daughter good health, in true country fashion. Mrs. Ray thanked me, after considering the proposal for some time; her daughter was too far gone in her reverie to heed me.

“You’ll be making a long stay here, maybe?” the old lady said.

“It depends how long Mrs. Zitman may require my services.”

“Are you coming a building down here? There’s been a mighty deal of talk of a new house for the Zitmans—there’s been a heap of stone brought from the quarries, and they say there’ll be a good many workmen about here presently.”

“That will be good for trade.”

“Yes—and you’re the head man, I suppose?—the slavoier.”

“The surveyor and architect—yes.”

“Did you make out the plans, sir?—if it’s not a rude question, of course?” she added.

“Yes, I did.”

“You ain’t paid for ’em yet?” was the next curious question.

“Not yet.”

“Ah! your money’s all right there, young man. They’re rich folk up at the house—they spend a sight of money there.”

"Indeed!"

Old Mrs. Ray was becoming quite loquacious. Had her daughter not been studying the red fire so hard, she would have checked the volubility of her mother.

"That Wenford man has been telling lots of lies about you to Mrs. Zitman. Did you see her face flush up when she caught sight of you?"

I answered the remark evasively.

"It's a face many a young man might take to," she said, dreamily, "and bring back to it some of the old brightness I knowed there afore her husband died. Before she married *him* p'raps, I might have said."

"She must have married very young."

"Seventeen only—such a child! She was the daughter of the old lawyer who died two years agone come Michaelmas. They married her—they married her," she repeated in a husky whisper, "before she knew her own mind. They made her a rich widow, early though—and thare she is for the first good-looking young man with a bold heart to fall in love with."

I shall never forget that old woman's look at me—the glittering fire each side of her eagle's beak. She was breathing hard and struggling with her breath, when Letty suddenly reached out her hand and shook her mother by the arm.

"Enough of this!—are you going mad to-night, that you play a foolish hand like this?"

"I'm playing no hand—I'm only talking in a comfor'ble manner, and it's your natur to interrupt, as usual."

"No."

"When you ain't a-staring at the fire, you're always a-worrying o' me. What have you got to look at in the fire so often?"

"My future," was the quick answer.

"It's a bad un—it will always be a bad un if you go on like this," moaned the mother; "years ago I told you of your goings on, your falling off from me. Your future, indeed!"

"Isn't it a bright one?" said the girl, pointing to the peat now lurid, and with its fire half spent; "see there, the golden days in store for me, the lover who is to drag me up to riches, the friends who are to crowd round and wish me joy."

"I see nothing."

"But the ashes—take that for the truer picture of the two."

The old woman looked at the fire as though she were reflecting on the matter; but it struck me that Letty had very adroitly turned the conversation.

A few minutes afterwards, when mother and daughter had assumed almost the same position, I expressed a wish to withdraw for the night. I was wearied of this little family sparring, tired also with the extraordinary fatigue which I had undergone that day, anxious

to be in bed and sleep off a few of the aches and pains to which much climbing and falling had subjected me.

I was glad to find myself in my own room, with the door locked between me and these Rays. It had been a day of restless incident, and its variety perplexed me. It had been full of the shadows of coming events—they are thick and manifold upon the path that lay before me. Figures that I had not known till that day had started into waking life, and were to influence my future—even in those early days for dreaming, I was sure of *that*. Already there were plot and mystery around, and in the vortex spinning but a little way apart from me, I might be engulfed, if more than common caution were not exercised.

I sat down at the dressing-table to think of this, with the wind rioting around the house, and the rain dashing furiously against the lattice casement. I fell asleep there battling with these thoughts, and was only awakened by the wind suddenly bursting open the ill-fastened window, extinguishing the candle, and blowing it and the candlestick against poor Jabez's waistcoat.

After that I woke up, fastened the window again, and hurried into bed, wherein I had the night-mare, and dreamed that "Mad Wenford" was strangling me in the Black Gap.

CHAPTER V.

CROSSING THE FERRY.

THE next morning the sun was shining in at my bedroom window—the birds were singing in a clump of trees that reared their heads at the back of the Ferry Inn. Strange, distorted trees they were, I perceived upon looking from my casement—a group of hunchbacks, with their humps to the north, and their dishevelled green heads to the south. The north-wind which came swooping up that valley between the range of mountains on either side, left those trees little time to rear their heads and grow strong. Nettlewood Vale, as the place was sometimes termed, experienced more bad weather in three months than the rest of Cumberland did in the year. I had been told that at the inn at Keswick, and I could believe it, when I was strolling a little way along the road in the early morning before the Rays were stirring.

Outside the door I had found my clothes and boots carefully piled;

the former baked to a board-like consistency, the latter covered with a liberal allowance of grease, as a preventive against further inroads of damp.

I was glad to find myself in my own habiliments again, albeit I had my doubts as to the wisdom of the step which preferred them to my yesternight's costume. Finding Jabez tarring his boat at the Ferry, I expressed those doubts to him, but he assured me I might rest perfectly satisfied about my health; no one caught cold from mountain rains, and if the clothes and boots had a trifle of wet in them, it was better walked out than baked out.

Taking the advice of one experienced in these matters, and preferring any risk to perambulating country lanes in my last night's disguise, I strolled a little way along the high road, as before remarked.

Lover of mountain scenery as I was, I felt more impressed than charmed by the view that lay before me on either side. A bare, desolate spot it appeared, even with the sun shining down into the vale—a place wherein to settle down and become crushed by utter loneliness. The mountains on my left stretched on in an unbroken chain down the vale, and were destitute of foliage, save in one instance, where a myriad of larches grew up the hill side to the summit, and relieved the monotony of the landscape by its very depth of colour. I could detect a white house at the base of the mountain, amongst the taller larches; I had no doubt that that was the residence of Mr. Wenford of Nettlewood. The Ferry Inn, and three cottages adjacent, appeared to form the village of Nettlewood; signs of church or chapel in the vicinity there were none. I looked round for the residence of Mrs. Zitman, but could see no trace of it; possibly it was at the bend of the road and past the "Larches," or was hidden behind the cliff that overhung the roadway in the other direction, where the world seemed to end in a massive wall of ironstone.

Across the Ferry were the Black Gap and its attendant mountains—black and sullen enough even on that bright morning to quench the sunshine which tried to brighten them.

I made my way to the water's edge, and endeavoured to fancy the view looked more cheerful from that position; but the water was unnaturally still, and looked awfully deep and uninviting. The shadow of the Black Gap mountains was cast upon it, and seemed to kill all light there. It lay between those mountain ranges a lifeless waste of water whereon no ripple played—a looking-glass to reflect the barrenness and wildness on all sides of it. It stretched its way down the vale, and seemed whence I stood to meet another waste of water, as dead and apathetic as itself, and continue the same dreary landscape on for miles.

Whether it were the effect of the scene, or of last night's bodily fatigue, I know not, but I was seized with a shuddering fit, that took

some effort of mine to conquer. I was not prone to gloomy thoughts, to morbid dreaming over unrealities that could never approach to waking life, but on that morning the dark impressions which beset me were too strong to master.

I felt my heart sink somewhat at life in this secluded spot; the mountains around me appeared to shut me from all ties of home as surely as though they were prison walls, manned by sentinels to keep watch against my efforts to escape. The place looked desolate and haunted; people who had gone mad here from inaction, had plunged into this still water, and were lying fathoms deep below me. I thought it strange long afterwards that on that bright morning such thoughts should have beset me; remembering all that happened at Nettlewood in the days that followed my "settling down" there, I think it stranger now. All that day I found a difficulty in drifting to a lighter train of thought; but the first vista of my future was not very cheerful. I could not see any prospect of locating myself in any place beside the Ferry Inn, and the thought of close contiguity to that dreamy old woman, and that half proud, half fretful daughter of hers, was not conducive to much exhilaration.

I went skirmishing after breakfast till a late dinner hour, in the vain hope of lighting upon some habitation wherein a decent lodging might be obtained, but my first glance round in the early morning had been comprehensive and truthful, and there were not a dozen houses in the place. During that day's skirmishing I found the church three miles down the vale, and three miles distant from a second village, which I will call Henlock in this story—a half-way church, convenient to no one, but keeping the good folk of one village from being jealous of the advantages attainable by the other. I discovered Mrs. Zitman's house also in the very spot at which I had guessed it to be—a dark stone mansion of considerable dimensions, situated at the very head of the valley, and backed by a perpendicular rock—and I discovered also the site for the new mansion, close to the water, and not a quarter of a mile from the inn. There had been plenty of stone brought from a quarry and placed on the plot of ground marked out for future building operations—where the workmen were to come from to carry out the scheme was a matter of serious perplexity to me.

I did not dine till five in the afternoon, by which time I had formed a passing acquaintance with Nettlewood. On my return to the inn, Letty Ray was standing on the little grass plot whereon the sign-post was reared, looking anxiously towards the Ferry. My "Good day, Miss Ray," gave her a surprise. She turned round with a little start, and I fancied, looked a little disappointed at my propinquity.

"Good day, Mr. Gear," she answered almost impatiently.

"I have been wandering down the Vale in search of the picturesque."

"Have you discovered it?" was the question she put, with a bright smile that changed the whole character of her face.

"Well—yes," I answered, "the place is picturesque enough, if sad."

"Ah! has it saddened you already? And yet there are people who wonder at me!"

"Are you tired of Nettlewood?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I am tired of life itself. And sometimes I am very happy here."

She turned away and went rapidly into the house, I following her. The best room was prepared for me that evening—the little bow-windowed room to the left of the entrance where the creepers grew half over the latticed panes.

To my surprise, Mrs. Ray, whom I had considered a fixture in the kitchen, made her appearance to lay the cloth for dinner,—a singular operation, as she had a painful habit of dragging one leg about the room with her and limping with the other. She was accustomed, I ascertained afterwards, to perambulate by means of a stick, but having her hands full on this occasion, she indulged in a few frog-like leaps round the table, holding on by the edge at uncertain intervals.

"I'm a sad invalid, Mr. Gear," she said, by way of apology for these antiquated gambols, "I ought to have been a lady, instead of slaving here. I'm more fit to take to my bed for good than struggle for a living in a place like this. You'll excuse me, I hope, sir."

"Nothing to excuse, ma'am."

"You're very kind to say so—you're very civil. It isn't often one gets the likes of such a civil young man as you are. You must be a blessing to your mother, when you're at home, sir."

I looked very hard at Mrs. Ray. This last speech sounded peculiarly like the solemn "chaff" in which my contemporaries at the architect's office were inclined to indulge at times. But if Mrs. Ray did not intend what she said, she had an enviable command over that parchment visage of hers. She was hanging by the table at that time, and surveying me in a half pathetic, half attentive manner with her basilisk eyes.

"Some mothers are born to have blessings, sir, and some are born to have cusses. That girl's a cuss to me!"

She lowered her voice as she delivered this assertion, but her whole expression had changed. There was real life in her face—there was the passion impossible to feign expressed in the manner with which she shook the table with her withered hand.

"You must not think that, Mrs. Ray. I'm sure you don't ——"

"Don't I?" she interrupted, beginning to nod her head with frightful velocity, "but I do! Don't I know it more every day, when every day she turns against me more and more, and shows the

little care she has for me. There's not a day without a taunt from her, there's not a day without—ale with your chops, sir?"

I thought Mrs. Ray had gone mad at last, or rather had given surer evidences of her mental infirmities. Then, the instant afterwards, I was left to admire her singular adroitness; Letty's skirt had brushed by the open door of the "best room," and without altering a single tone of her voice, Mrs. Ray's maundering had drifted into a simple inquiry concerning the dinner she was preparing for me.

"Ale, please."

"Thank you, sir. There's none better in the county," and with two little leaps she vacated my apartment.

"If that woman harasses me much more," I muttered, "I must build a house for myself out of her way."

She did not appear again. I heard her scolding her daughter in the passage about wasting her time, and idling the Lord knew where, and leaving her poor mother, with her infirmities so thick upon her, to attend to all the customers! Letty, like a wise girl, made no response to this capriciousness, but relieved guard by bringing in the chops. Always mutton chops, by the way, in mountain districts, unless one is fishily inclined, and there is an aborigine to catch trout for him. I could not fail to remark, during the few minutes bestowed upon me by Letty Ray, that the girl was singularly altered from the preceding night. Her step was lighter, her voice had not that despondent ring in it, there was less of that oldness of thought expressed upon her handsome face. I could not help confessing that she looked very handsome that night; the rich olive of her complexion was set off by the deep claret dress she had chosen for that particular night's wear. She reminded me of my sister Ellen in some mysterious way or other, and yet the only resemblance between them was the raven blackness of their hair and eyes. This girl's features were stronger, sterner—there were pride, decision, and a wonderful power of resistance, or of obduracy, expressed therein. Ellen's face was pale and delicate; the face before me was as dark as a gipsy's, and radiant with health. If the Cumberland air would only bring such roses to my sister's cheeks, it would be worth risking a week's earnings to come in search of them some day. Some early day, too, when I knew more of the country, and had plenty of time to escort her about the lanes and mountain passes. What a holiday that would be for her—her who had known less change and had worked harder than myself in life!

Letty completed her attendance and tripped briskly away. Through the bow-window I could see her a few moments afterwards, standing on the grass plot and looking again towards the Ferry somewhat anxiously. Was the lover, of whom she spoke so sarcastically last night, expected in Nettlewood before the sun went down? Not before the sun went down at all events, for my dinner was finished,

the high mountains shut out the sunlight, and there was greyness of coming night already in the Vale before Letty entered the house with a slow, almost a lingering step.

She entered the house to receive another lecture from her mother. They were exchanging hasty words immediately after Letty's entrance—the thin partition between the best room and the kitchen would not shut out the altercation.

"What do you want to take a walk for at this hour of the day? it will be pitch dark before you've gone a hundred yards. You were off last night, like a madwoman, for no reason that any one could see. And haven't I been alone long enough, d'ye think?"

"Very well."

"It's very bad as I see it, and feel it, and suffer from it. Letty, you're a blight!" And with this vicious summary, the old lady evidently closed her remarks for the present.

"I am not going out—can I do anything for you?"

"No, you can't."

"Very well."

"Don't I tell you it isn't very well?" snapped the mother. Then ensued a long silence; mother and daughter were in their old positions by the peat fire, I felt assured, by that time.

I drew my chair to the fire, which had been lighted for me, although the days were early yet to think of chimney-corners. But that the nights soon grew chilly at Nettlewood, I was not long in ascertaining for myself.

It was dark night, and I had fallen into a half doze over the fire, when the Ferry bell rang across the water. I leaped to my feet and ran to the bow-window, one side of which commanded a half view of the Ferry. However, there was no view to be perceived through the murky darkness—I could hear voices shouting to and fro in the distance, and for a moment I detected a female figure, with a shawl over its head, flit past the window, cross the grass plot, and pass through the little swing gate which opened on the road. I could just see that it did not turn in the direction of the Ferry, but passed away to the left, where the thin distinct line in the darkness indicated the road to the village.

Anxious to kill time myself, I seized my hat, and made for the door, running against Mrs. Ray, who was slowly but silently dragging herself in the same direction.

The collision might have been serious, had not the landlady flung out her long arms and caught at both sides of the passage.

"Who's that?" she cried.

"It is I, Mrs. Ray. I hope I have not hurt you."

"N—no—not much. You might have killed me though."

She could not refrain from even giving me a piece of her mind as she made room for me to pass—a quiet piece of withering sarcasm that had the effect she desired.

"It might be as well another time, sir, when you are *horsing* about this dark passage, to make sure there's no poor invalid in the way to trample on. You're going down to the Ferry, sir?" she added in a more amiable tone.

"I think so."

"Will you tell my thankless child to come back—I want her at once. It's very odd that girl can't keep still, and be a comfort to me."

She had better eyes than I had, or eyes more used to the position of affairs. For when I was straining mine into the darkness before me, I heard her say,

"Jabez has got George to help him. It's the young squire coming over, I should think."

I went out of the gate, and down the sloping roadway leading to the Ferry. I could just see a large flat-bottomed boat being pushed away from land, and Jabez's face aglow with the light of a lantern on the seat. I strolled up and down the bank, and watched the progress of the boat across the lake—listened to the murmur of voices on the further side, as the wind wafted it now and then to my ear. I was still watching, when I felt a claw-like hand upon my arm. The old woman of the inn had crawled and hopped after me to the landing-place.

"He's coming now, sir."

"Who?"

"The squire. The brother of the handsome lady you've come down to serve."

"Are you sure it is he?"

"I'm never mistook in my presentiments—I can read what's coming to me, days and days, sometimes years and years, afore the hour's ready for it. Excuse me leaning on your arm, sir, I've rather overdone it hopping down the lane."

She leaned very heavily against me. More than ever I objected to this troublesome old witch. I should soon hate her as heartily as Mad Wenford did. I was not surprised at any one entertaining for her the most lively and intense antipathy.

"They're off," she said, with a feeble croak; "They're coming on now. If they're damp, they'll order brandy. Please God, their clothes are wet enough to wring! I wonder where that young wild-cat of mine has got to."

The old wild-cat looked round her once or twice in a vain search, until the propinquity of the ferry boat absorbed the whole of her attention.

"Do you see him?" she whispered.

"I see a man standing up in the boat, holding two horses by the bridle-reins."

"That's the groom," she said peevishly; "a little to the left of him—sitting down and staring at the water."

"I see now."

"He's a coming at us like a Fate," she croaked. "He's a-coming to affect your life and mine for ever after this. You don't know what a deal that man has in his head."

"For good or evil?" I said laughingly.

"*I don't know!*"

I was surprised at the emphasis of her reply, at the earnestness in her husky voice, at the excitement under which she laboured, and which made her grasp my arm until she pained me.

"He's a-coming at us like a Fate!" she repeated, as the boat touched land and its inmates proceeded to disembark. Jabez's companion held the lantern to show a light on the squire's path—the squire himself an instant afterwards was on the Nettlewood side of the Ferry.

"A welcome back, sir," said Mrs. Ray, dropping a courtsey.

"Thank you, mother," returned a voice strangely soft and womanly—a voice that I fancied was not wholly unfamiliar to me. I could not see his face distinctly at that distance, but I saw that he looked towards me for a moment before he turned to his horse which the groom had brought him, and leaped lightly into the saddle.

"Won't you stop at the inn a moment, and rest, Mr. Vaughan?"

"Thank you, mother, I am pressed for time to-night. Here, Jabez."

He tossed Jabez a piece of silver, and rode off; the groom had returned for his own horse, which proved more refractory, and required some coaxing to leave the boat. His master was out of sight and hearing long before the groom had mounted.

"Always like a snail, you are," commented my uncivil companion; "if I had been your master, I would have discharged you, or horse-whipped you, long ago."

"But you ain't, Mrs. Ray, and ain't likely to be."

"You don't know what I may be before I die, you dolt."

"I know what you are now," was the reply. It was couched in a manner somewhat enigmatical, but Mrs. Ray did not take it as a compliment. She screamed out a piece of her mind as the groom rode after his master; we could hear him laughing as he galloped off.

"They treat me like a worm," she muttered; "they're all alike in these parts. Some of these days I'll go to London, and see what they'll say to me there. Jabez," leaving go my arm to talk to the ferryman, "what did the squire give you?"

"Half-a-crown," was the answer, and somewhat a reluctant one.

"Let me see—let me see."

She went hopping towards him with extraordinary alacrity, and I took that opportunity to escape. Naturally courteous as I might be, I had not come to Nettlewood to escort crippled old women about dark lanes.

I hurried back to the deserted inn. Finding my room looking

very dismal without a light, I took the liberty of proceeding to the kitchen to borrow the landlady's till her return. To my surprise, Letty Ray was there, sitting by the table, with her head buried in her hands, the shawl that had draped it trailing at her feet. She looked up as I entered, and asked impatiently what I wanted there?

Her face startled me—it had become so haggard since I last saw it, and the eyes were swollen so.

"I came to borrow the light until——"

"Take it."

"Not if you wish it, Miss Ray."

"The darkness suits me best. Take it—take it," she cried, with an impatient drumming on the table with her fingers.

I took the candlestick in my hand, and left the room. I heard her fling herself towards the table again, and resume her old position before I closed the door. In my own room I could hear her sobbing very violently, until the shuffling of feet in the passage announced Mrs. Ray's approach; and then there was a pause, succeeded by a wild snatch of a song from Letty's lips—a song that echoed through the house and made the glasses on my little sideboard ring again.



CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE TALK WITH MRS. RAY.

THE next morning a groom brought me a letter from Nettlewood House. "Another delay," I muttered before I broke the seal, "a life of action is not yet likely to commence here." It was a delay of but a few hours, however.

"Nettlewood House, July 3, 18—.

"Mrs. Zitman's compliments to Mr. Gear, and trusts to have the pleasure of his company to dinner this evening at five. No visitors are expected."

I was not a lover of dinner parties, but it was a relief to me to find that the day was not to pass without some portion of the business which had lured me from London being brought on the *tapis* for discussion. "No visitors are expected" was evidently a hint not to be too particular concerning my dress—not to allow the prolonged absence of my portmanteau to stand in the way of my visit.

However, the portmanteau made its appearance in the carrier's cart at twelve in the day, much to my peace of mind, which the invitation had naturally tended to disturb. There was at least a dress-coat in my travelling trunk—somewhat faded and old-fashioned—and I proceeded at once to hang it over a chair, with its back to the fire to reduce its multiplicity of creases.

This was an operation that appeared to stir up a little of Mrs. Ray's bile. Her lower extremities being worse that day, or being pronounced worse by the owner thereof, she had refused to stir from the high-backed chair whereon I had found her the first evening of my arrival at Nettlewood.

The fire in the best room was not lighted in the day-time, so that I was forced to beg permission for a little space at Mrs. Ray's to carry out the process of rejuvenescence.

"You're going company-keeping, young man," she said, after eyeing my dress-coat critically for some time.

"Mrs. Zitman has kindly asked me to dinner."

"She never asked me to dinner in her life, although I am her dead husband's next of kin," she complained; "they don't think much of us at the House. Ah, ha!" she added, with an extraordinary chuckle, "but they must—but they must, too!"

I was leaving the room when she called out,

"Do you want this coat attended to, Mr. Gear?"

"No, thank you. I think it will do very well as it is."

"It's as sparrow-tailed a gibbet as ever I saw in my life! What do fine folks put such things on for when they're going into company?"

"Fashion—simply fashion."

"You're a pretty sort to talk of fashion," she muttered. This latter observation was not intended for my ears, which tingled somewhat at the meaning conveyed in the criticism. But perhaps I was a pretty sort—it was very probable indeed.

I was leaving the room again when she once more arrested my progress. Letty being busy in remote regions upstairs, and business being slack, Mrs. Ray found inaction and loneliness somewhat too monotonous to let me slip easily through her fingers. She was a woman who required amusing in her way.

"You're in a very great hurry this morning, Mr. Gear."

"N—no—not particularly."

"We had a young man lodging here last spring—he came for his health and never found it, poor object—who was the nicest young man you ever clapped your eyes on. He took a fancy to me, and called me his dear old mother, he did. Weak of him, wasn't it?"

This last question was uttered in an acrid manner, which I disregarded. Very kind of him, I thought it, and remarked as much.

"He used to come in here—when I sat all of a heap, just as I do now—twice a day to talk and read to me. He was just like a son;

I 'spected him very much, and he 'spected me and my complaints, and didn't make game of 'em."

This implied that I was in the habit of "making game of 'em"—an unfounded implication which Mrs. Ray might have spared me, although I thought it was scarcely necessary to deny the imputation.

"He was a trifle too fond of reading prayers to me, but then he was brought up to that business, and it soothed me off to sleep, if he didn't cough too much—which was another bad habit of his. You're so different to him, now."

"Am I indeed?"

"Ah! he was an arnest, hard-working young man—he looked at things very differently to you."

I could not refrain a laugh at this.

"Why, my dear Mrs. Ray, how do I look at them?"

"You look at things that may make or mar you—God knows which, I don't know or care myself—with uncommon quietness. You're a man that takes things easy, I know. If you were ruined to-morrow, you wouldn't grieve much—if you had a disappointment to knock you down, you'd grow fat whilst it lay a-top of you. You're slow-going, and may do for these parts, although good luck may pass you by, and you never a bit the wiser. Oh! I wish I was you, with your strength, your years, your chances!"

The old woman caught at her crutch-headed stick in the corner, and brought it down with a thump upon the hearth-stone. There was a something on her mind that troubled her about me.

Mrs. Ray's emphatic summary took three-fourths of the breath out of my body; it was forcible—it was in some respects not far from the truth, and did infinite credit to her powers of observation. My brother Joseph had once given me a similar analysis, blaming the patience with which I suffered and jogged on, as though grieving against the unalterable could have pushed me forward by a hair's-breadth. Mrs. Ray saw what Joseph Gear had seen two year's ago—nothing deeper or more intense. Of my own character I was vain enough to have formed a different conception. Half in jest and half in earnest, I sought to shadow it forth to this singular old woman.

"Taking the ills that flesh is heir to with composure may be a failing of mine, Mrs. Ray—I am not ashamed of it, as curing those ills has not lain in my power. Still in all my life I have never let an opportunity slip by me, though I have had but few chances, and in my own quiet way have sought to find them here and there. But when the time for action comes, which may come even here—I don't know—there will be no obstacle to daunt my progress, and no danger which I shall not feel myself strong enough to fight against and surmount. When the battle of life begins in earnest, I will be a foremost man!"

"You mean that? Why, you've quite a colour, sir."

"Oh! yes—I mean it. But when there's no battle, Mrs. Ray, it's

rather ridiculous to be prancing about on a war-horse, and flourishing a drawn sword against enemies that have not existence."

"I like spirit," affirmed this picture of indolence, "p'raps you'll do, after all. When the battle comes, I'll drag myself up a hill to see the fight, and pray for the bravest and the luckiest. It mayn't be you—it may even be Wenford of the Larches, and hate him as I do, I'll pray for him too with all my heart and soul. The bravest and the luckiest—ah, ha!"

The stick dropped to the floor, and the yellow wrinkled hands went one over the other with a rapidity that made me dizzy to watch them. Of what battle was she thinking to disturb her so?—was it the one *mêlée* of which she seemed ever dreaming by the fireside there?—which she might have implied to me on the first night of my acquaintance with her, if the daughter Letty had not interfered? The old woman's earnestness impressed me strangely—had already warned me a little above my usual temperament. I could not divest myself of the strange idea besetting me; I went away into the green lanes with the clash of the coming battle in my ears; the life of action—the life that keeps the eyes bright, the cheek flushed, and the heart beating preternaturally fast—seemed advancing nearer every day. The distant waterfall which dashed down the rocks into Nettlewood Water appeared to me that day like the hum of the enemy's force advancing from the misty future. Life was on the change with me—I should change with it presently!



CHAPTER VII.

NETTLEWOOD HOUSE.

I PUT on my dress-coat at half-past four in the afternoon. The wrinkles were out of the back, but there was a small burn in one of the tails. I was not of a suspicious turn of mind, but the idea instantly suggested itself that Mrs. Ray had done it on purpose. By any theory of red-hot projectiles from kitchen fires I could not understand how that burn could have been drilled there, but I made no accusation, and if it were a fresh eccentricity of the good lady's, I forgave her on the spot.

I surveyed myself very carefully in the cracked dressing-glass on the drawers, and drew a comparison, not particularly odious, between

myself dressed for dinner at Nettlewood House, and the half ostler, half nondescript, who had presented himself to Mrs. Zitman's astonished gaze at Nettlewood Inn. When I left London I was afraid that I was not looking staid and old-fashioned enough; now the impression that I might have looked less grave and owl-like seized me, and rendered me a little uncomfortable. So opinions change with the changes which the world presents, in each of its revolutions round the sun.

I walked to Nettlewood House. There was an old fly, and an old horse to match, that might have conveyed me thither, but my purse was not full enough to allow of such extravagancies, had I been even more impressed with the conviction that walking about a mountain district in evening dress was a decided conglomeration of the sublime and the ridiculous. Fortunately there were few natives to be struck with dismay at my appearance; Mrs. Ray broke into a feeble titter as I went out at the door, and two quarrymen, making for home across the Ferry, cried "My Gosh!" at the spectral visitation. That was all the inconvenience until I neared Nettlewood House, when a little boy who had been tending sheep in a neighbouring field, ran screaming across country for his life.

Before Nettlewood House, and going slowly up the broad carriage drive to its extremity. The house looked duller, damper, and more desolate the nearer I approached thereto—an old-fashioned mansion, slowly and surely dropping to decay, and and placed ever in shadow by the dark mountain side against which it had been built.

A tall, angular scotchwoman, with light hair, responded to my summons at the door. So stern and sphinxy a woman, in so rusty a brown silk, that my nerves jarred a little at this first specimen of the Zitman household.

Before I could announce my presence in any manner, she said, very briskly:

"Ye're Mr. Gear, I suppose? Coom in."

The door banged too and shut me in a spacious hall, the walls lined with dark mahogany, and the floor tessellated with marble.

"This wa'. They're waiting for ye."

I left my hat on the hat-tree, and followed this specimen of Gaelic uncouthness along several passages. There seemed no end to the corridors—dark and shadowy, despite the old-fashioned lamps which were already lit there—as we made our way along them.

She opened the door and announced me.

"Mr. Gear's coom."

And Mr. Gear entered the spacious withdrawing-room, opening upon the dining room at the further extremity. Mrs. Zitman and her brother rose to receive me, the lady of the house extending her hand as she advanced.

"Welcome to Nettlewood House, Mr. Gear. Let me have the

pleasure of introducing my brother to you. Mr. Vaughan—Mr. Gear.”

Mrs. Zitman's brother and I shook hands. He expressed in a few easy sentences, and with a peculiarly melodious voice for one of the sterner sex, his satisfaction at making my acquaintance. He looked and spoke like the well-bred gentleman.

He was a handsome man, above the middle height, and of seven or eight-and-twenty years of age. A face that was very prepossessing at first sight—clear and well cut, with a keenness, almost a craftiness, in the two brown eyes that met your own. To a physiognomical critic, the white forehead might have appeared a trifle too prominent and bumpy above the eyes. It was a singular forehead, and attracted the observer at once—narrow but high and prominent, and surmounted with a mass of brown hair which seemed curling every way at once. Altogether it was a striking head surmounting a form that, if not the perfection of manly grace, was at least well-made and indicative of no small amount of strength.

And Mrs. Zitman? Though I have described her brother in the first instance, I had naturally turned to her on entering, and been struck more than ever with the youth and grace of my patroness. In her quiet grey silk evening dress she looked still more young and fair. I could not imagine, at the moment, that she had experienced so much trouble, been courted, wedded, widowed, and yet have remained so childlike in appearance. It was only when one looked at her face, so pale so intense in its anxiety, that one guessed at the cares she had known, and the struggle to keep strong that it had been with her of late years. Like her brother's, it was a singular face; in her deep grey eyes there was, though less marked, the same keenness of expression, softened as was natural enough, poor woman, by the troubles which had shadowed her young life.

“My sister has, I believe, informed you, Mr. Gear, that my absence from home has been the cause of a little delay in the prosecution of the business which has called you here. I trust we shall make up for lost time now.”

“I am at your service, sir,”

“We are anxious to proceed with the house—we may harass you even a little with business before the evening is over. Janet,” turning to the woman, who stood gaunt and statuesque against the door of the adjoining room, “do you wait to-night?”

“O' coorse—it's the first nicht hame o' the lad I ha' nursed, and wasna it a promees?”

“Ay, to be sure. This is an old friend of the house of Vaughan, Mr. Gear,” he said, with a pleasant laugh. “Caleb Balderstone the second, in petticoats a little too short for her.”

“Ugh!” commented Janet, who had heard the remark.

“Those old-fashioned followers,” he added, in a still lower tone,

to me, are still existent in these old-fashioned parts. I confess it is pleasant to meet with them, and the contrast between them and the stately lacqueys one is bored with in London, is favourable to the servitors of auld lang syne. They are rough diamonds, Mr. Gear, but there is the true fire inherent in them, and we can value them—even honour them—as they deserve. You who are a stranger must excuse the rough attendance for this once.”

Mr. Vaughan making his excuses for attendance to one who had been always in the habit of waiting upon himself was somewhat of a burlesque, but I bowed and begged him to make no apologies.

“Will you see to my sister?” he said, with a careless wave of his hand in her direction.

I offered my arm to Mrs. Zitman, and we preceded Mr. Vaughan into a spacious dining-room—well-warmed, well-lighted, and yet again impressing me—as the whole place had—with its strange gloominess. The furniture was too massive for the room, the moulding of the cornice was too heavy, the crimson curtains before the several closed windows seemed too absorbent of the light shed down from the old Gothic candelabrum above our heads.

Even the dining-table was too large for us, and seemed a hindrance to pleasant dining-room chat. I sat a yard and a half apart from the hostess and brother, who at each end of the table must have been half lost to one another. It wanted twenty persons at that table at least, to give life and animation there—and it wanted some one less gaunt and frigid than the woman flitting in the rear, to give a cheerful air to the background of the picture.

There was little conversation during dinner. Mrs. Zitman, at least, was of a thoughtful and abstracted turn of mind. The idea even struck me that she was under a certain sense of constraint—which was an exaggerated idea to possess me, at that time. A shy, almost a startled look towards her brother, before she spoke to me; an embarrassment in her manner of reply; a timid hesitant manner adopted to the brother—all these might have been natural ways with her, but seemed, even in that early time for judging, singularly unnatural to me. This constraint—if such it were—suddenly and wholly vanished before the stately series of courses were at an end; she shook it all off with the toss of her head, as though she was shaking away a water drop. After that she led the conversation, spoke of my profession of architect as a grand and noble one, alluded more than once to my plans for the new house she intended to erect; asked me what I thought of Nettlewood, and the country adjacent.

“It appears a very picturesque locality, but—”

“Go on, Mr. Gear,” she said, quickly.

“But to one who has been used to London streets all his life, to the bustle of a great city, it has a singularly depressing effect.”

“Indeed!” she said, in a low tone of surprise.

She looked towards her brother, but his eyes were fixed attentively upon me, and did not turn to meet her gaze.

"It is merely the change," he remarked.

"Possibly," I replied, "and this is my first experience of a mountain district. Nettlewood, for instance, is so surrounded by tall barren hills that one seems walled away from life by them."

"It is life in prison—the prison airing-yard, only a trifle larger than usual," remarked Mrs. Zitman. Haven't I said so, Herbert, many times?"

Herbert laughed very pleasantly at this impetuous appeal.

"Oh! you have said so, Mary, when the woman's love of change has made home rather more distasteful than usual——"

"Not distasteful."

"Well, more objectionable—more dull," he corrected. "I suppose there are times when the home-shadows will crowd rather thickly upon us. In the old days, Mrs. Zitman was one of a happy family," he said, turning to me, "and life was spent with an indulgent mother and father, now unhappily lost to her. She and I are going to try the new excitement of building, Mr. Gear—hence the pleasure of seeing you at Nettlewood House."

"You speak as if I were not the only victim to the dulness of this isolated district, Herbert," she said, in a lighter, gayer tone, that seemed to render the room a hundred degrees brighter on the instant, "as if you never succumbed to the shadows, and fled away to the stirring life of cities to escape them. You men are always so patient!"

A sepulchral voice at the back broke in upon the colloquy, and startled me.

"Lor! the bairn must have change, God bless him! He's young, and na fit for mopin awa' in this spot—he cooms back looking fifty pounds the better for 't."

This interruption was taken as a matter of course. Herbert Vaughan laughed and struck his hand smartly on his knee; Mrs. Zitman turned in her chair and looked back with a bright smile at the gaunt speaker. I could tell in an instant, by that smile, how a life of less isolation would have affected my hostess for the better.

"And am I fit for moping, Janet?—should I not return to Nettlewood fifty pounds the better woman?" she asked. "Why, Janet, you are a bad casuist."

"Ye may ca' me what names ye like, maistress," she responded. "but the bairn's richt. And ye've seen life, lady, and p'raps it wadna be befitin' your young weedowhood to be gadding aboot the gran plaases ye and I hae heerd sic talk aboot. And, lady dear, ye and I are women, wi' mair patience, an' war made for hame—wasna we, noo?"

"For home, Janet. Ay!"

It was a wail over a home that was not near her at the time, and

thrilled me strangely. I had been watching the face which had changed for a moment, when the serving woman had spoken of her widowhood—only for a moment, expressive of pain and suffering.

Herbert Vaughan had seen it too. He waved his hand to Janet a little impatiently.

"That will do, Janet—company, remember."

"I dinna forget, Mr. Herbert. A' my leef I ha' kenned my plaas."

"That's true."

He said it with a laughing glance towards me, but the servant did not detect the irony of the reply.

"The young maister kens that weel eno'," she muttered.

Dinner was over a little while after this, and replaced by a dessert of some pretension. A luxurious dessert, set off by a series of old-fashioned, yet costly Wedgewood ware.

"You are a judge of china, Mr. Gear?" remarked Mr. Vaughan, seeing my attention directed to the dessert service.

"Oh! no. But Wedgewood ware is somewhat familiar to me."

"This is an old service of Mr. Zitman's—my brother-in-law was a great collector of china. If we have time we will look over his specimens presently."

"We shall not have time to-night, Herbert," said Mrs. Zitman, firmly.

"No—I'm afraid not. Mr. Gear, will you assist Mrs. Zitman?"

I did my best to attend to Mrs. Zitman; the long serving-woman, whom I had detected more than once staring at me with a very basilisk gaze, took her departure; the crimson of ports and clarets, and the golden gleam of sherries, shone from diamond-cut decanters amongst the Wedgewood.

Mrs. Zitman did not linger long over dessert; when she had retired, Mr. Vaughan brought forth a cigar-case from his pocket, and pushed it along the table towards me.

"You smoke, Mr. Gear?"

"No—I thank you."

"Well—smoking is a bad habit, which grows upon a man, and becomes next door to a disease. I have a friend at 'The Larches' who is smoking himself to death."

He alluded to Mr. Wenford, whose name I did not care to dwell upon just then.

"Very unwittingly you touched on dangerous ground a little while ago, Mr. Gear," he said to me; "as we are destined to see a great deal of each other, you will pardon me if I put you on your guard."

"I shall be obliged."

"I need make no secret of the singular will which Mr. Zitman left behind him. If you stay a week in Nettlewood, you will hear the story from the good people at the Ferry Inn, or in the village. Mrs.

Zitman inherits her late husband's property under condition that she remain at Nettlewood, a place for which he possessed a deep affection!"

"And Mrs. Zitman?"

"A dislike closely approximating to an antipathy. You will perceive now, Mr. Gear, that your sweeping and—pardon me—your unfair criticism will not tend to Mrs. Zitman's more favourable consideration of the locality."

"I am very sorry," I stammered—"of course I was not aware—" He hastened to interrupt me.

"Pray offer no excuses, Mr. Gear—rather allow me to plead *my* excuse for intruding a family matter upon you at the first period of our acquaintance together. By Jove, these family matters will get in the way of plain-sailing, at times."

He lighted his cigar, and seemed to be reflecting seriously for some moments. Suddenly he made a dash at family matters again.

"They have already been talking about us at the Ferry Inn, I presume, Mr. Gear?"

"They have mentioned your name once or twice."

"But have not thrown a light on the family history, which they are in possession of, and which every idle tourist who puts up there is compelled to hear before he quits them. Upon my honour, those Rays are the oddest people in the world!"

He laughed at their oddness—put his cigar on the corner of the dessert plate to enjoy his laugh with greater ease.

"They will tell you in a day or two of another clause in Mr. Zitman's will, affecting them more seriously than you possibly imagine just now. Mrs. Ray was Mr. Zitman's sister."

"So I have heard."

"One of those poor relations that will turn up when a man has made a fortune," he said; "a relation that had been at daggers drawn with her brother years and years before he died. He remembered her in his will, however. The fortune Mr. Zitman left behind is bequeathed to Mrs. Ray in the event of my sister being foolish and unwise enough to marry again. There's the whole of a history I need make no attempt to disguise from you—the little boys you meet up the mountain side looking after the sheep know it as well as my sister and I. It's not an unnatural piece of confidence forced upon you a few moments after our introduction to each other—it is simply my method of telling our own story, without any dramatic effect. You are sparing with the wine, Mr. Gear."

He dismissed the subject as unceremoniously as he had entered upon it; he required no comment, which, however, I should not have cared to make. He entered into no details—only a concise summary of his sister's position he placed before me, leaving the lights and shadows to be filled in by those outside talkers to whom he had adverted. It was a cruel story of man's jealousy and selfishness—

existing beyond the grave, to be a sting to those he had benefited after his own eccentric fashion. This Zitman had been an old and covetous man in his life time, I felt assured already—I could imagine him Mrs. Ray's elder brother, and picture him "in my mind's eye" very correctly. The only thing that perplexed me was the reason for Mrs. Zitman marrying the man—with any love of gain, I could not associate that young anxious face which had shone before me twenty minutes since. The story disturbed me long after Mr. Vaughan had dismissed it and was speaking of London to me; I was thinking more of it than of his discourse—it led me more than once to answer him at random. There was an uncomfortable suspicion at the bottom of all this confidence of Mr. Vaughan, which would intrude and make my ears tingle. That gentleman who preferred smooth sailing might have been anxious to shadow forth the truths of his story, lest any unworthy ambition—such as a fortune-hunter might have—should lead me astray in the early days of our acquaintance. I who might not be unwilling to make a dash for an heiress, would pause awhile if her money lay ever beyond my hope of grasping it. He might have thought that, judging, as a man of the world, and so have kindly put me on my guard. And after all, was it natural to feel aggrieved at an explanation that saved so many mistakes, supposing even his story had been framed with an intention to warn me?

A random answer, which he very naturally did not understand, and requested a repetition thereof, brought me to the surface of things; thoughts foreign to the present hour I dismissed immediately. I paid every attention to his subsequent discourse, and was struck with his general knowledge of books, poets, painting, sculpture, and lastly, architecture. He was better read than myself, and yet I had been a student all my life, and not wasted much time apart from books; he had a retentive memory, and treasured details to an extraordinary degree—every minute he reminded me, by an apt quotation or reference, of how much I had forgotten. There was a well arranged store-house behind his high, white forehead.

He was an agreeable companion during that after-dinner hour; a man that instinctively won upon you by his frankness and *bonhomie*. There was no pride in his manner, no *hauteur* that implied his consciousness of being higher in the scale than yourself. He was anxious to please without appearing anxious; his laugh was the most pleasant and melodious I had ever listened to. With this man, as with his sister—a patron and patroness, however much their manner disguised the fact—I should get on very well at Nettlewood.

The notes of a piano, played in an adjoining room, arrested our attention here, and reminded both of us that we were lingering too long over our wine.

"We are scarcely courteous to Mrs. Zitman," he said, rising;

"with your permission, Mr. Gear, we will adjourn to the drawing-room."

He led the way out of the dining-room by a door opposite to that by which we had entered, and went across the landing-place to a second door, before which some heavy curtains were hanging to exclude the draught. In a moment afterwards we had entered the drawing-room.



CHAPTER VIII.

MY PATRONESS.

AN old-fashioned drawing-room to match the rest of Nettlewood House, but comprising within its four walls articles of as great a value and costliness as any modern *salon* in London or Paris. Cabinets of ebony and ivory, of ebony and silver, tables of costly marqueterie work; statuettes, bronzes and caskets, of ancient date, but unmatchable. A wealth of riches sunk in the strange shapes and materials shut in by the dark wainscot. There was a rich Turkey carpet on the floor, and tapestry of a fabulous value excluded the little daylight that might have filtered through the window that July evening.

Mrs. Zitman was sitting before the piano, listlessly striking a few chords—chords of a wild, melodious character, that one could not listen to without thrilling strangely in every nerve, and which seemed half appropriate to the sombreness of the room in which we were.

Mr. Vaughan looked at his watch as we came into the room.

"I half expected Wenford this evening," he said.

Mrs. Zitman's hands dropped into her lap as she exclaimed:

"That man again! Why that man?"

Mr. Vaughan laughed at her surprise.

"That man, Mary, is surely not so very objectionable. Now you and he perfectly understand each other's little foibles, he may be borne with, for the sake of the friendship between him and me, my sister.

"I have not much to complain of—he is good company at times," she said, hurriedly; "if he be a friend of yours, and will consider

himself *only* a friend of yours, I will venture to add that I shall be glad to see him."

"To be sure," said her brother, heartily; "bygones are bygones, even in Nettlewood, and Wenford, after all, is only an eccentric man, with one of the best hearts in the world."

"Possibly."

She left the piano for a side-table, whereon were writing materials. With a very rapid dash she began writing in a long narrow book she had drawn from a drawer. There was a grand flourish, the tearing of a leaf from the book, then an advance towards me with the paper fluttering in her hand.

"Short reckonings make long friends, Mr. Gear," she said, with one of those rare bright smiles which so wholly changed the expression of the face it lighted up; "and I am short of friends in Nettlewood."

I took the paper and glanced at it. It was a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds, payable at the Carlisle Bank, Cumberland. It was the prize for which, some fifteen months ago, I had fought hard to win. I bowed over the fair white hand, and thanked her.

"Just a little business before Mr. Wenford comes to dash every sober thought away with his brusqueness," she said, leading the way to the fireside. "Herbert, will you join us?"

He was standing by the table, looking at an old illuminated missal which he had taken therefrom. He shook his head at the suggestion.

"Details of business are my abomination," he said, "I leave the matter entirely to my more practical sister and the architect."

"This way, then, Mr. Gear."

I was sitting by the fireside with Mrs. Zitman the instant afterwards.

With an aptitude for business remarkable in a woman, and so young a woman, she dashed into facts and figures connected with the new Nettlewood House that was to supersede the old. In a few minutes I perceived that she had wholly mastered my plans, and knew them by heart.

"And this house you calculate will not cost me more than five thousand pounds," she said; "that was the sum stipulated in the advertisement which asked for plans. You can promise this?"

"Yes."

"A few hundreds may not matter much—to a few thousands I should object."

"Mrs. Zitman need not fear so grave a mistake in my calculation of 'quantities'."

"Next week there will be fifty men, under an experienced foreman, at your disposal, from seven in the morning till five. The builder will call upon you at the Nettlewood Inn one day early in the week, and discuss the whole matter with you. I believe that it is his intention to lodge at Henlock, with the greater portion of his men, whilst the works are in progress. You will understand that you are *le capitaine en chef*. I trust all to you—you are responsible for all."

"I hope to be deserving of your confidence, madam."

"I think you will—there is something in your face I trust at once."

My face turned the colour of beetroot at this frank admission; she, who detected it, coloured also at the effect that her hasty words had had upon me, although she laughed a little at my embarrassment.

"They are such hard Cumberland faces hereabouts," she took the trouble to explain, "stolid and wooden, a mask for the mind at work underneath. I'm not attempting a clumsy bit of flattery when I say, yours is a face I can at least understand."

"Well, I have not much to conceal, Mrs. Zitman," I said; "there are no secrets to keep my mind ill at ease."

"You are a lucky man," she replied, hastily and vehemently; "yours is a fair world, free from plotting and unbeset by plotters. But this building?"

"This building," I repeated.

"Must be finished by Christmas. Call in a hundred extra hands, and we will ransack Cumberland and Lancashire for them if necessary, but pray spare me another Christmas in this mausoleum."

I affected not to regard her singular eagerness.

"I will do my best—with good workmen I can almost promise it."

"Thank you," she answered, quite gratefully; "I shall be glad to escape from here. Does not this place strike even you, a stranger, with a chill?"

"It is a fine old mansion," was my evasive answer.

"When I was a child, I had a horror of it. I was lost once and taken here for shelter till my friends could be sent for, and the house nearly drove me mad then. I did not think at that time that I should ever marry its owner, and come here to live—that its shadows were to haunt me and keep me restless ever afterwards. You are smiling at my excitability, Mr. Gear."

"I assure you, no."

"I think I shall be able to settle down in a new home, where the associations will not be sad ones. Oh! I have such hopes of that, though I leave my brother behind here, and become still more isolated."

This appeared strange, but she did not stay for an explanation. She was a rapid speaker—*was*, perhaps, a little nervous or prone to excitability.

"You will not mind me interfering with your plans a little, in good time—suggesting a bay-window whence a look out down the vale may be obtained, or a fitting place for a study, where I can scribble my rubbishing poems when the fit of construction is on me?"

I thought of Mr. Wenford's warning in the railway carriage; I was thinking of it when Mr. Wenford himself was announced—not by the gaunt female, but by a smart footman, in a dark-blue livery. Mr. Wenford entered in full evening dress—or rather that more ancient style of evening dress which found vent in white neckcloth, white vest, and a prodigious cambric frill. He entered very quietly, and with

a grace for which I had not given him credit heretofore. He shook hands with Mr. Vaughan, he bowed formally over the more delicate hand of the hostess, he turned and shook hands very heartily with me, in my turn.

"Mr. Gear, I am very pleased to renew our acquaintance, begun in the Black Gap. That was a hard fight of ours for Nettlewood Ferry. I believe, Mrs. Zitman," turning to that lady, "I have related the full particulars to you already?"

"You told me an incoherent story the same night, I believe," she said, a little contemptuously, "along with a story more ridiculous and untrue concerning Mr. Gear."

"Upon my honour, I am heartily ashamed of that little *escapade* of mine," he exclaimed, "it was part of one of my mad fits that people talk about and exaggerate down here. One of the worst of them, lasting, I regret to say, six months come to-morrow."

Mrs. Zitman flushed scarlet—hers was a tell-tale face, like my own, and betrayed her feelings somewhat too demonstratively. I saw at a glance that six months ago Mrs. Zitman was connected with the last mad fit of her guest.

"I ask forgiveness, Mrs. Zitman," he added, "it *was* a fool's trick. There, is not that openly confessed? You, who hate tergiversation, will acknowledge that at least."

"Forgiven, Mr. Wenford," she replied.

"Shall we shake hands upon it?"

"If you like," she answered, laughing, "if you will promise never to misunderstand me any more."

"I have outlived all misconception," he replied, "I am the soberest soul in Nettlewood."

Mr. Wenford and Mrs. Zitman shook hands. I saw him look at her with a mournful intentness, which was very new to me, on his face; as he turned away I certainly heard a heavy sigh escape him. And yet the moment afterwards he had knocked the illuminated missal from Herbert Vaughan's hands.

"What a studious young hermit you are still!" he exclaimed, laughing at his friend's blank look, "even in the best of society pouring over the rubbish that you keep as plentifully sprinkled about here as in old Zitman's time."

Vaughan frowned, and looked from him to his sister. She had not heard the last remark, however.

"Oh! I'm always forgetting," Wenford said, with a short laugh.

Mrs. Zitman heard this.

"Forgetting what, Mr. Wenford?"

"To ask you for a song—the voice of Beauty to charm and soften the Beast."

He laughed at his own comparison. For politeness sake, though he did not look as if he had appreciated the joke, Herbert Vaughan laughed too, before he turned to his sister.

"Mary, will you favour us?" he said.

She rose at once, and crossed to the piano. With her usual rapidity of action her hands were gliding over the keys, her voice was welling forth in that great drawing-room—that splendid desert of dead relics.

She had a voice of an extraordinary sweetness—a powerful voice for one naturally so slight and delicate. It rang nobly forth, and must have echoed along the corridors where the servants were flitting, and lured them to stand and listen for a while.

"A fine voice—well trained and powerful," said Mr. Wenford in my ear.

"Very."

"It's the voice of a syren—she sang old Zitman out of his soul, his senses, and his money-bags, five years ago with it. She has done damage with it since, though she didn't mean it," he muttered, in a low tone.

He walked to the fire, and poked at it briskly, in the middle of the second verse. A look from his friend arrested that minor eccentricity, and he subsided into a chair, and nibbled at his thumb-nail instead.

The remainder of the evening passed in a manner not distinguishable from other meetings of a similar character. In this company one forgot the gloom which each seemed to confess hung about the mansion, as a November Fog hangs about warehouses on the river's margin in London. The conversation became general, and was well-sustained: Vaughan sang a fashionable opera morceaux; Wenford attempted "The Wolf," in a fine bass, that would have been finer had it not cracked so often, and broke down utterly before the first verse was ended. I was pressed to sing, but from a perfect knowledge of my own incapacity that way, was compelled to decline. After singing, we had one rubber at whist, and the three, at least, played with an intentness and skill as though they were playing for life, instead of sixpence a corner. These country folk, I thought, take a strange interest in life's frivolities—apart from the turmoil of cities, even games of chance becomes matters to be studied gravely. There was so little to disturb the still life of the picture here.

The party broke up early—Mr. Wenford leaving with myself, and lighting a cigar by the hall lamp before he ventured into the night air. He wore his cloak with the red lining that night, and looked like a gigantic life-guardsmam as he stood bidding Mr. Vaughan good night on the door-step.

"You'll find my carriage come round for me half-an-hour hence. Tell Tom to go back again, I shall walk home. Good night."

"Good night," echoed our host.

Wenford passed his arm through mine, and in this friendly contiguity we proceeded along the carriage drive together.

In the dark country road he said—

"Well, Gear, what do you think of them?"

"What do I think of them?" I repeated.

"An odd couple—are they not?"

"I see nothing particularly odd about them," I replied. "I have been received very warmly at Nettlewood House, and am grateful for their kindness and hospitality—for the cordiality extended towards me as to an equal in birth and position."

"They're hospitable enough—kind enough in their way. We don't strut about in this wilderness with our heads very high in the air, and a new friend is a new treasure. I knew you'd do. Why, I took to you myself, man."

"Thank you," I said, laughing.

"I suppose you know by this time Mrs. Zitman's story? You haven't seen the Rays and Herbert Vaughan for nothing."

"The story has been related to me."

"Zitman was a disagreeable old devil living—he leaves an unpleasant smell of brimstone behind him still. He lived, man, with uncharitableness with all men, and he died as happily as he lived. How I hated that man!—how he hated me, good God!"

"Has he been dead long?"

"Two years and a half. He crushed all life out of his young wife before he died—you can see his memory weighing her down in every word."

"She appears nervous or excitable."

"It's her natural manner now—I remember her so different! But then," with a hollow laugh, "we were all different once! Have you been told yet by Mr. Vaughan, or by the communicative Mrs. Ray, that I proposed to Mrs. Zitman six months ago come tomorrow?"

"No."

"I have got the start of them at least. Yes, I charged full butt at the will, and, with no regard for the beggary *in futuro* of Herbert Vaughan, Esq., offered this mutton hand to Mrs. Zitman. She wouldn't have me, Gear."

"Indeed!"

"She sent me raving and blaspheming away, I remember. As if I wasn't to be preferred to the old miser who gave her her name. As if any one would have thought she set store by the gold he left behind for her comfort."

"I don't think she does."

"Why didn't she have me, then?"

He asked the question so fiercely, and would have resented so warmly the real motive, which had already struck me very forcibly, that I did not care to disturb the harmony of our companionship by suggesting the truth. He hinted at it himself the moment afterwards.

"She might not have fancied me, or my ways, but I think the money was at the bottom of it. If there had been a lover there

instead, I would have shot him, as I would shoot him now, like a dog, were he to cross my path and take her for his wife."

"Is that quite fair?"

"I shall never trouble her again with my love-suit—I've drunk three-fourth's of the tender passion out of me; but no one else shall ever marry Mary Zitman without running in danger of his life. There, that's a true and particular confession, Gear—see how I take you into my confidence, you, my sworn brother-in-arms!"

I did not like his confession—in my heart I resented it as though he had warned me, as Vaughan might have warned me a few hours ago. Warn me of things that could never happen by any possibility—that I dared not even dream of—that I laughed at in my own room, long after he had crushed my fingers together in his iron grip, and bidden me "good-night."



CHAPTER IX.

A LETTER FROM ELLEN.

THIS reached me the following morning. I insert it here in its proper place, withholding all remark. It threw a little light upon the strangeness of my last serious conversation with my sister:—

"Kennington Road, July 2nd, 18—

"MY DEAR OLD BROTHER,—Will you let us know as quickly as possible how the world is treating you down in Cumberland? Mother had a dismal dream about you last night, and has been inclined to fear this morning that something has happened. As if your dear steady old self was not capable of steering clear of danger in any shape or form. As if anything 'out of the way'—what an ugly phrase that is, Can!—were likely to beset you in the grim mountain region whither you have fled from us. Write soon.

"I have been thinking, Can, of our last talk together coming home from Joseph's house, of your puzzled look at me as if you doubted or distrusted me for the first time in your life. Well, my dear, have patience, and wait my time to clear up a little mystery that is shutting me in, and yet from which I shall escape. It concerns you more than you think, or I might tell you at once; it might influence your

life for better or for worse—I fear for worse—down in Nettlewood.

“Pity me Can—think of me who never had a secret in my life, who never could keep one, shut up in a world of my own, wherein I can take no confidant to myself. I am only fidgety, though not unhappy. God knows, in the midst of it all I have great cause for happiness—that I am looking forward to a great change beyond the miserable round of teaching the Burnetts—that steadily, but surely, I shall emerge from the mists into a brightness which will make my heart lighter than you have known it since that great misfortune that beggared the Gears. In a few weeks at the latest you will hear full details of the life in store for me. Don’t be anxious all is going on well. Even the green willow in our back garden is looking fresher and braver—augury of braver times for

“Your affectionate Sister,

“NELLIE.”

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III.

A STRUGGLE WITH FATE.

“Have we been tilling, sowing, labouring,
With pain and charge, a long and tedious winter,
And when we see the corn above the ground,
Youthful as is the morn, and the full ear,
That promises to stuff our precious garners,
Shall we then let it rot, and never reap it?”

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

“I am two fools, I know,
For loving and for saying so.”

DONNE.

CHAPTER I.

CANUTE'S CONFESSION.

EARLY in the month of July, the new mansion was begun. Life began, too, in Nettlewood, and an air of bustle prevailed that little mountain district, such as had never before been remembered by "the oldest inhabitant." The sight of the new building was farther away from the wall of iron-stone, and close to the Nettlewood Water—above the Ferry by half a mile at least, and near the water's head.

Every morning an army of workmen came trudging from Henlock, where there was more accommodation for them, went busily to work at Nettlewood, dined—the majority of them—at the Ferry Inn, and trudged back in the gloaming to Henlock. Business began at Nettlewood with me—the matter-of-fact business of stones and mortar, of elevations and windows, gable ends and porches the interminable study of "quantities," kept me ever employed. There was less time to ponder on the dulness of the scene in which several months of my life were to be spent; less of the atmosphere of romance which in the beginning appeared to be enwrapping me, despite my efforts to remain my old self in everything.

This for the first fortnight, and then I had little to do but superintend the progress of the works, urge forward the builders, as I was urged forward by Mrs. Zitman in my turn. There came a time when I had leisure to think again—when Ellen's letter began to perplex me more than it had in the early days of its delivery—when Herbert Vaughan and his sister became subjects for my deeper study the more often I was brought in contact with them. Vaughan and his sister were a strange couple—there was something in each that interested me—their manner towards each other struck me as peculiar.

Mrs. Zitman visited the works thrice a week at least, unfavourable weather excepted. In her feverish anxiety to be quit of the old home, she was always complaining of delay, scolding me at times for not pressing forward the men to efforts which verged on the superhuman. When I hinted once that if the building were completed by Christmas, it would be scarcely safe to constitute it at once her habitation, she exclaimed—

"Directly the roof is on, I will have fires in every room of the house. We will chase the damp from the walls very speedily."

Her brother was with us at the time. He turned to me with a laugh.

"She has no pity on one who is to remain in the house from which she is determined to escape. I acknowledge the gloom that hangs over the place; what will it be when the fair presence that has tended to lighten it, flits away from me.

"You are strong-minded, Herbert," replied his sister; "you are a student, and can live in a world of your own. More, you can leave home, and enter fresher and brighter worlds, from which I am debarred.

"Yours is a hard fate," he said ironically.

She was quick to reply. There was a flush on her face as she answered him.

"It is," was the reply.

Herbert Vaughan laughed, as though he tacitly disputed the assertion. I doubted it myself, and thought that Mrs. Zitman was a trifle too despondent over the fortune that had been left her, and the conditions annexed thereto. But there were days when she was less despondent than others—days when she was almost gay, and gave evidence of a naturally light heart.

These days, I began to observe, occurred when her brother was not with her; the "dark hour" was only upon her when Herbert Vaughan accompanied her to the works. I remember him going to Carlisle for three days, and the great change there was in her during his absence. She came more often to watch the progress of the building; to suggest a little timidly, a change here and there; to trip lightly from one point to another, singing snatches of her favourite songs, some of which I had listened to in the stately drawing-room of Nettlewood House. She ran up the mountain side to see the effect the view had from the heights—I could hear her singing there in the bright sunshine like a lark that had escaped from its bondage. She descended flushed and panting to my side again, looking very beautiful.

"Those who drop into Nettlewood from the mountain heights—the indefatigable tourists who try every inaccessible part for the sheer love of danger—will have a fine view of my new house, Mr. Gear," she said; "will wonder, perhaps, who is the *happy* denizen of so fair a habitation."

For a moment she spoke a little scornfully, but observing the intently of my gaze, she cried,

"And I shall be happy there, too. I will try hard to keep down all regrets, and think how fortunate I am to be apart from temptation, poverty, and fifty other things that might render me more childish and weak than I am. Herbert always calls me childish and weak—what do you think of me?"

She looked fearlessly into my face. The light in her deep grey eyes daunted me a little. I could not help hesitating in my answer to so leading a question.

"Tell me in five minutes' time," she said, laughing at my surprise;

"I am curious to know the estimate you have formed of your hard task-mistress."

In five minutes' time she was at my side again.

"Well, Mr. Gear?"

"Well, Mrs. Zitman?"

"Have you arrived at any conclusion. Am I childish, weak, frivolous, whimsical, bad-tempered, good-tempered, wise, or foolish?"

"I—I really must decline to answer," I stammered; "I have had no opportunity of estimating your true character."

"You don't think that I am a very tiresome woman?"

"No."

"I don't worry you?"

"Certainly not."

"That will do, then. People about here think I worry them. I can see weariness—and 'oh! how I wish she was gone!'—on half the faces I meet. If I go over to Henlock, and amuse myself with the school children, the poor governess's face becomes more troubled. If I stay at home, Herbert complains of my restlessness, or of my interference with his studies; if I and the rector discuss parish matters, the clergyman talks of his head aching after a while. Sometimes I fancy that I speak too rapidly, and that people cannot follow my ideas readily enough, and are too polite to call me to order. What a sad thing it is that there is no one to scold me, or to tell me a downright and honest piece of his mind."

This dialogue occurred during Herbert Vaughan's absence. I never forgot it; to a certain extent it displayed Mrs. Zitman in a new light—although it proved still more the excitability of her disposition. Although I had not the courage to confess the impression which I had conceived of her character, I could see that she was more like a child than a woman; that there was the frankness and ingenuousness of one who had mixed but little in society, and had been accustomed to much of her own way. She always appeared to me a light heart kept down by adverse circumstances; a bright nature seeking ever to escape from the depths into which it had been submerged.

I could fancy that her brother did not make any great effort to encourage the better nature, the brighter thoughts; in fact, as I saw more of them both, I could but perceive that her natural manner was objectionable to him, and that he took a great deal of pains to curb it. He did not thwart her so much, as he laughed at her attempts to be gay, and satirized her little peevish exclamations at the dullness of her existence. More than that, I fancied that he watched her, and that she knew he watched her, and became more restless in consequence. Hence her more bright and natural moods when business or pleasure took him beyond the mountains. But in all moods, let me confess at once, she became an attraction to me. I found myself, against my will, thinking too often of her—becoming interested in everything she did and said, finding the days pass very slowly

when she did not brighten by her presence the new scene of my labours. All this I confess to have happened in three months, to have worked so extraordinary a change in me, that thinking soberly of it in my own room, I sat aghast at the vortex into which I was deliberately allowing myself to be drawn.

Matter of fact life went into that vortex and was whirled away, at the end of those three months—the first romance of my life I entered upon with my eyes open, and with danger and despair in advance of me. My whole character changed; I felt to have gone back from eight-and-twenty years of age to my one-and-twentieth year again—to feel the heartburnings, jealousies, follies of youth, uncertain of nothing but that there was a divinity to worship, and a passion to prey on the worshipper.

It could never come to anything, I was sure of that! In the first place, I took that grim fact to my heart, and nursed it there, as the Spartan boy nursed his fox. Honour, or duty, even my love for her, kept that distinct and real—was the boundary line between my folly and the sober life I pretended to be following. It could never come to anything, I repeated twenty times a day—they became talismanic words to keep me strong. She was a lady, above me in every respect—had it been even possible to awaken in her some fragment of a love for me, I could not marry her without bringing her to ruin—without ruining her brother, and others who were, perhaps, dependant on her bounty. That was a concentrative selfishness which I scouted with all the warmth of a heart that, at least, had not always made its owner the first consideration—which assured me of the folly of loving—though there was no power on earth to keep me from silently, passionately dreaming of her.

It all began with my pity for her—that pity which is akin to love—which I found apply so truly to my case. I saw at once that she was a disappointed woman—that hers had been a disappointed life. From one source and another had been wafted towards me the fragments of a story easily pieced together—easily explained. The old story of a sacrifice for position—of her father, a retired London solicitor, thinking how good a chance it was for his daughter when Zitman made her an offer of his hand. A long struggle before consent—a marriage—an ill-assorted union, wherein there was much unhappiness—an early widowhood—a selfish will, that bound her down to the old thoughts, almost the old life, unless she fled to penury for an escape. A free, artless disposition, perverted from its natural development, meeting with obstacles at every turn, and struggling against them ineffectually. A generous heart, shipwrecked and drifting on an angry sea, that tossed it to and fro, and gave no rest.

All this I saw and pitied—saw and loved!

When I discovered this at last, I discovered also the danger on all sides of me. Proud of my strength, I resolved to sink the madman's

feelings I had engendered, and hide, even from her, a sign of the folly which, despite all sober reasoning, had come to me. I felt that the novelty of my position was embarrassing to begin with—soon I should live this down, and pass slowly on the beaten track, with never a one to guess at the pent-up fire within me. There became a fresh motive for exertion—for pressing on the works, so that the mansion might be completed by Christmas time, and I might go my way and vanish like a dream-figure from the troubled little sphere in which I moved.

I believe I kept my resolutions, and maintained my disguise well. So much depended upon the assumption of my usual self, that it would have been villainous to pass beyond the line I had drawn with an unflinching hand.

I did not dream for an instant that, had I attempted it, I should have impressed Mrs. Zitman with the fervour of my passion, but I should have made enemies for her, nevertheless, and strengthened more than ever the vigilance of her brother's watch. Her brother's fortune trembled in the balance with hers, and he would have been a hero not to let the sordid thoughts of the world cross him at times, and keep him distrustful.

And yet if he were distrustful, there was never evinced to me one decisive proof. He played his cards well, and I could but guess at the progress of the game by the more anxious or the more sad look visible on his sister's face. He showed no suspicion of me; on the contrary, hypocrite that I was, I deceived even a man more than commonly observant. He could not read down to my heart, whereon was written a story that would have paled him with affright, and he therefore asked me very often to Nettlewood House, invitations which I found courage to decline at times, and which at times, also, I accepted against the common sense that warned me of seeing her too often.

To see her was to perceive that she was unhappy, and that was to pity her, to love her, to burn with a desire to be her champion, and save her from her splendid misery. So from July till September—till my love was nearly two months old, and I had seen more of Mary Zitman's character, of its delicate shading, its fair salient points, which only needed one careful hand, one loving heart, to make her the happiest of women. It was pleasant to me, although I made no sign, to be sure that I was a welcome guest at Nettlewood House; that I was a relief to the shadows against which Mrs. Zitman protested. We were all very good friends—brother and sister had both confidence in me; Vaughan had no fear that I was falling in love with his sister; she did not start from me with affright at the thought of the one central figure she was to my romance.

But the suspicion came at last to one of them. It had become with every day a devotion more difficult to conceal—her smiles, her scarcely-concealed tears, had too much power to affect me. I was a

fool, who thought all signs were to be ever hidden, when, with every day my love grew stronger, and fretted more impatiently against the barriers in my way.

I was a visitor there one evening at the latter end of October. The weather had become suddenly very cold; on the mountain tops snow had gathered and melted again—signs of the winter fast advancing on us.

I had arrived late, and found brother and sister sitting together in the drawing-room. Long Janet, as the woman was generally termed, had admitted me, and led the way to the hostess.

"They're unco mopish this nicht," she said to me, confidentially, outside the drawing-room door; "the lang nights here are na liked—there's too muckle time for them to talk thegither. Canna ye coom mair aften here?" she whispered, hastily: "they bear wi' ye, better nor maist people I've kenned coom."

Before I could fully comprehend the meaning of this rapidly delivered speech, she added—

"Dinna say I hae said a word. It's na my place to interfere atween the bairns, God bless 'em baith! Deed, and they micht na like it at a', now I coom to think o' it."

She looked at me with a scared expression.

"You may trust me, Janet."

"O' course I meight," she said, with a grim smile of relief; "dinna they trust ye, baith o' them?"

"I hope so."

She opened the door as I spoke.

"Here's Mr. Gear coom," she announced, and shut me in the drawing-room.

Vaughan and his sister were talking earnestly by the fireside. They ceased abruptly as I entered. It had been a discussion of more than usual importance, and had affected one of them, at least, in more than an ordinary degree. Mrs. Zitman was crying; I saw her white hand dash some tears impetuously away, as the servant warned them of my coming.

"It is over-precaution—I cannot bear it this year!" I heard her say, as I entered.

The subject of their discourse did not appear to be a secret. Mr. Vaughan immediately alluded to it.

"We have been discussing a subject which is never a pleasant one with Mrs. Zitman," said Vaughan, turning to me; "the cold winds, which necessitate a more rigorous confinement of my sister to the house. While the north-east element comes sweeping up the vale, my sister's life is in danger every time she passes the threshold of her home."

"I have not suffered from cold for two years now."

"Because we have been cautious—because I have exerted my authority as brother, guardian, protector, Mary."

"And kept me a prisoner here every winter. Mr. Gear," turning to me suddenly, "do I look so delicate a woman that a north-east wind is to wither me up?"

Mr. Vaughan did not allow me to reply.

"We have had the best of advice. From all quarters the one refrain is, 'Take care—take the greatest care.'"

"Put yourself under lock and key, and constitute Janet Muckersie gaoler in ordinary to the establishment. What advice!" cried Mrs. Zitman, scornfully.

"Which you will follow during my absence at least. Which you have promised me to follow," said her brother.

"Yes," she answered, with a sigh.

She looked at me with a half sad, half humorous expression.

"Farewell all the teasing interruptions to the business of the day, Mr. Gear—all my excitability about the delay, the snail-like movements of the men, the sleepy foreman, the still more sleepy builder. I retire from the world of action to my cell here, until a flash of sunshine relieves guard, and says, 'Escape whilst there's an opportunity!' And as the sunshine comes very seldom here in winter without the north-east wind, which is my bitterest enemy, they say—I don't believe it—why, I shall have to bid you good-bye for many weeks, perhaps; I have made a promise in a weak moment again—there is no help now," she added with a sigh.

I did not answer. The blow was a heavy one, and bore me down for a time, even in their presence. It was unprepared for, therefore I showed my disappointment by putting my hands on my knees and staring thoughtfully at the fire. No more of the little figure; the pale and intellectual face beneath the broad felt hat; the pleasant change of mind, and the womanly petulance at the apparent slowness of the builders; the airs of fretfulness even with me if I fell not in with her views immediately; the girlish laugh that escaped her now and then, and made my head spin when all was going well, and she was pleased with everything.

Her health would not allow her to venture from home in the winter months, and Vaughan's absence precluded me from calling at Nettlewood House. He was going away to-morrow for a month—for a whole month, I heard him say, and the remark rendered me thoughtful, and the fire before me more than ever an object of interest.

I was roused suddenly to a sense of my misbehaviour.

"The news appears to sadden you, Mr. Gear!" remarked Vaughan.

I started, coloured, looked towards him, and tried hard not to flinch from the bright searching eyes that were transfixing me. But I flinched, and at the first sign of my weakness I saw the first suspicion steal over his face, and for an instant darken it. We were both on our guard the moment afterwards. I was wondering whether

a guilty conscience had not tended to deceive myself when he spoke again.

"During my absence in town, Mr. Gear," he said, "I trust you will look in here for a moment now and then to report progress, and keep my sister's interest alive in her pet scheme. Any cheques that may be wanting to prosecute the plans she will draw. Mr. Wenford is always kind enough to cash them for us."

"When it may be thought necessary, I will call here for a few moments, Mr. Vaughan."

"Thank you; I am sorry to incur so much extra trouble upon you."

"No trouble," I answered in a manner that was a trifle confused, for I was still a trifle bewildered.

Mr. Vaughan, however, heeded nothing now; he spoke of his journey to London, and asked very politely if he could be of assistance to me in any way—which he could not, I replied, with many thanks for the offer of his services.

Going away that night, Mrs. Zitman said, very suddenly—

"If I should not see you again, Mr. Gear, I rely upon your interest in my plans to push forward the work by every means in your power. Before Christmas you have promised me—before Christmas I rely upon entering my new house."

"If it be possible," I answered.

"But nothing is impossible with perseverance," she entreated; "if you fail me, it will be the greatest disappointment of my life. You are energetic—give me your promise, Mr. Gear."

"I promise."

I replied very decisively. I could not resist that firm assertion; she begged so earnestly for it, and I felt that it would make her lonely hours in the old home more easily borne. So I said, 'I promise with all the confidence I could command.'

Mr. Vaughan stood watching his sister's face very intently; he did not appear to heed my words so much as the effect they created on his sister. He followed me to the hall, and shook hands very heartily.

"I leave you in charge, Mr. Gear," he said; "I may trust you in every thing?"

"In everything, Mr. Vaughan."

He thanked me again; he had been full of thanks that night. His concluding words were spoken in a jesting mood, but they left the impression which they were intended to convey.

"Then there will be no accusing judge to upbraid you on my return; to exclaim, 'Thou bad and unfaithful servant! what atonement canst thou make for the trust thou hast abused?'"

He said it with a burlesque air, but there was an under-current of reality, very deep and stern, and he intended its full force to bear upon me. He succeeded.

CHAPTER II.

A RESCUE.

THERE was no sign of Mrs. Zitman or her brother at the building the next day.

"The wind blows from the north-east, does it not?" I asked of the nearest workman.

"Ay, sir, to be sure it does. A rare place for north-easters be Nettlewood Vale."

I was aware of it. Every tree bent its head away from that cutting blast; every hedgerow tore itself away from it, and struggled with it, and cowered under it for life's sake; the leaves were whirled away before their time then, and branches strewed the roadway all the winter months, snapping above the heads of passers by, and threatening death-warrants.

The north-easters had set in the beginning of that October. The hardy mountaineers bore up against it; their wives at Nettlewood and Henlock who were of delicate health, or had chest complaints, did not venture without doors—the clergyman's daughter, who was not expected to live, was borne away to Devonshire in search of the strength it was impossible to find—the snow settled on the highest hill points, and there was a fringe of ermine on the summit of the Black Gap.

Mrs. Zitman did not venture forth; Mr. Vaughan imitated her example, and spent his last day at Nettlewood with his sister. I was sure he had not taken his departure; he must have crossed the Ferry and gone by the Lower Lane, as it was called, or he must have passed the country road on which I kept watch all day.

The intense bitterness of the cold that October morning reminded me of the frost which might set in, and hinder all business alterations. The building was making a feature in the landscape then; a hundred men raised the echoes daily with the clang of chisel and trowel; the foreman, fired by Mrs. Zitman's past enthusiasm, stood and bullied and swore in the Cumberland dialect all the day long—the builder, who was a short man, trotted and puffed about, and fell over things, and scolded the foreman. It became my duty to scold the builder in his turn, when he did not look sharp after the men.

The builder and I held a council of war over the coming frost, at which he shook his head lugubriously. He didn't recollect much building being carried on in the winter time, Cumberland way; he

stared with horror when I assured him that Mrs. Zitman had made up her mind to spend Christmas Day in her new home.

"Good Gad, sir,—it'll never be done—it can't be done!"

"Have another hundred men on. There is nothing elaborate about the building, and we may push forward during the next month."

"I'll go to Carlisle, and see what hands I can muster," said Mr. Sanderson.

"Get them by any means—advertise for them. Mrs. Zitman will not mind the expense. The men *must* be obtained."

"Yes, sir."

He looked very bewildered by the stern air which I had assumed. He promised to hunt up the men from Carlisle and Lancashire; doubling the staff would certainly precipitate the work. He'd go to Carlisle the beginning of next week.

"Go to-morrow, Mr. Sanderson. You will oblige me."

"Yes, sir. To-morrow it shall be, sir."

"Pooh!" he said, wiping his forehead with his silk handkerchief, after I had gone. "There'll be some piping-hot work between this and Christmas Day. We're in for it now, Mr. Caulfield."

The foreman thought so too. He perfectly coincided with Mr. Sanderson in every particular.

Wandering about the works that day, I commenced planning a variety of schemes for keeping the men at over-time—for working them early and late, and paying them well for extra service. It was a question of time rather than money now; I felt bound by the promise which I had made to Mrs. Zitman. In the restless fever that possessed me then, I felt that I should have little mercy on those whom I directed.

I was the last on the works that day—the workmen took their departure in the direction of Henlock; the daylight died out above me; the heavy shadows filled the valley, and stole up the mountain side; the stars came out one by one, and glittered in the water spreading out silently and stealthily below there in the Vale.

I felt inclined to linger there that night and wander up and down the roadway, to and fro, beset by the spirit of unrest. I was distracted in mind; the lover's fever had come to me in my turn—I who had laughed at such things in books, and turned to ridicule the unreality therein, felt that the hour was on me when solitude was congenial, and that the white stars were friends of mine to apostrophize my fate to. There was a morbid satisfaction in lingering about the waste of material piled round the place. When I turned at last to go, a something held me back, and the wind, surging by me, seemed to whisper, "Wait a while!"

The conviction settled so firmly upon me, that I took another turn amidst the piles of hewn stone, and went along the waste ground where the terrace was to be built in some future day. In the early

* spring perhaps—certainly not before Christmas. Mrs. Zitman must be contented with the erection of the house. Would it be completed, after all?—would a hundred extra men, an army of them, have any effect in expediting the work to completion, as I had rashly promised? My heart sank a little when I thought of it deliberately; there was so much to do—after all the months of labour, it was such a wreck of stone-work standing there as evidence of action.

I was thinking of this somewhat ruefully, when the rapid clatter of horses' heels arrested my attention. The sound was from the direction of Nettlewood House; in an instant I divined that Mr. Vaughan had chosed that late hour to take his departure for a scene more full of life. He was coming gaily on; he was in good spirits, and singing a snatch of song as he advanced; it was his voice, I could have sworn to it amongst a thousand. He experienced no sorrow at leaving his sister in that desolate house alone, but in his selfish gladness felt his heart more light at the prospect of the change which he was seeking.

"He was all self," I thought; "all that stood in his way he bore down or leaped over. What motive to take him to London could extenuate the circumstance of leaving one so weak and excitable in the great home she dreaded?"

He passed by me carolling gaily. He had great animal spirits; he was the best of men for a life in the sunshine—when the storm came what would become of his butterfly wings, I wondered? I said this a little contemptuously; I had not fathomed his character—more, I had formed a false estimate of it. This man's life I knew afterwards had been stormy and tempestuous; there were fiercer storms looming up from the horizon, and he would have the will and nerve to meet them. His was a life for storms.

He passed me, and I stepped into the road and looked after him. The night had deepened then, and he was soon lost in the gloom. I went a little way in his direction, and then turned and walked rapidly back towards Nettlewood House. There was a satisfaction in looking at the mansion wherein she sat immured, under the bar and interdict of her brother's will. There was a light in the window of the drawing-room, but her figure did not cross the lighted blind; I felt that she was alone and in trouble there.

Half-an-hour afterwards I retraced my steps. The night was cold and I walked fast. To my surprise the rattle of horses' hoofs receding along the country road startled me at the next bend, where a solitary tree overshadowed the roadway.

My first impression was that I had been watched; my second, that the horseman had been loitering on his way, chatting perhaps with that figure which I could distinguish hastening along the footpath that led by a near cut to the Ferry. The footpath was in my route, and I struck into it; the figure turned, and I fancied looked back at me before it hurried away. Suddenly it vanished.

I stood and rubbed my eyes, and then made a dash towards the place where it had disappeared. There was a high bank to the left, and a narrow path below it, at the very water's edge. I felt that there was danger abroad that night—the temptation, perhaps of death, besetting some one very weary of the world. I ran to the bank, and leaped down into the narrow path. Far ahead of me a woman's figure was hurrying away into the darkness that enshrouded the source of the Nettlewood water. I followed it, sure of the shadow of death hurrying on with that woman and tempting her. I ran at my utmost speed, calling to her to stop; the mountains on all sides of me caught up the word and shouted "stop!" to her. I gained ground, I fought hard with the breath that was deserting me—I was close upon the woman, when she turned suddenly and flung herself with an awful recklessness towards the water.

The bank was steep and rugged there, and her dress caught in the roots of a tree which jutted thence; for a minute there was a struggle to free herself—I could see her arms fighting against this hold upon her life; I flung myself on the bank, twined my arms round her, and lifted her by main strength from the water. Her long hair was dank and dripping with wet; the shawl which had covered it drifted into mid stream; the water from her garments and from my coat-sleeves formed a pool at our feet. Stooping down, I looked hard into her face.

"Letty Ray!" I cried.

She rose suddenly to her feet—I could see her eyes glittering like a wild beast's in the darkness.

"Let me go," she said, "I am not dangerous now. I have seen the devil too near me, and the fit is over!"

"This is very mad and rash, Letty. What earthly motive could influence you to so desperate a deed?"

"A man's lies. A coward's blow at all the hopes he had fostered, the bright life he had drawn for me, and which I was to share with him. He talked of making me his wife—he loved me so—and he meant my ruin. God seize his soul this night!" she cried.

"Hush!—hush!"

She wavered, and looked hard at me.

"Well, not so bad as that," she exclaimed, "I'll love him through all his scorn of me; he won me by speaking fair—if his words were false, my love will last. I swore it to him sixteen months ago."

"He's not worth a thought of an honest girl's, Letty."

"I'll think of him she said doggedly. I'll love him through all the deceit he has tortured me with; when he marries another, I'll weary him and her by my affection for him. He brought me to love him—now mark this!"

She caught me by the arm and looked me hard in the face.

"He may hate me now, find me ever a bar between him and his future, but I will love him till his dying day—I will haunt him all

the days of that life you have been fool enough to give me back. I was face to face with death a short while ago—it seemed pleasant to drift away from all the littleness and vexation and horrors of my poor existence. I who haven't a friend in the whole world—not even in the mother who bore me.”

She gave vent to a passionate wail that froze my blood; she covered her face with her hands, and broke into a convulsion of tears and sobbing, painful to stand witness to, and feel so helpless to alleviate.

“Courage, Letty, there are friends in store for you. Honest friends to help you on, and a future far less dark, in which you will be sorry for the madness of this night.”

“Thank you—thank you. You're very good to talk like this, but you don't believe it more than I do. I'm going home now. Will you play the friend to me, and say nothing of this?”

“If you will promise never to attempt so wilful a crime again.

“I promise. I'll take my oath, if you like!”

“No, Letty, I'll take your word. I can trust you.”

“Don't follow me—don't answer any questions of my mother. Go at once to your own room. It's awfully cold to-night, Mr. Gear!”

She shivered as she spoke.

“Change that dress as soon as you can, Letty. Good-night, girl—try and keep strong.

“I'll try, sir.”

She turned back towards the Ferry Inn. Though I kept her in sight, I had no fear of her again tempting her fate that night.

CHAPTER III.

SENT FOR.

HALF-AN-HOUR hence all that happened in the last chapter appeared very like a dream to me. When I entered the inn, and glanced towards the great room facing me at the extremity of the passage, I found mother and daughter in their old position, by the fireside—the mother upright and stoical in her straight-backed chair—the daughter crouched on the stool, and staring at the lurid glare of the

peat. This was the family idea of comfort, and I did not intrude upon it that evening. I took Letty Ray's hint and proceeded at once to my room. I went early to bed, although I slept less that night than ever I had done at Nettlewood.

There was much to think about—the incidents of the last few hours would perplex me, and render me restless. He who had sought to betray Letty Ray, to lead her, through her love for him, to ruin, was, in my opinion, easily guessed at—could, in fact, be no other than the brother of Mrs. Zitman. How had I been deceived in him! What tortuous depths of that man's character would it ever be impossible to sound! What a crafty, silent way of procedure, making no sign, only shadowing forth here and there some evidence of evil constantly at work! If it were he whose duplicity had cast this horror on the poor girl's life, he was a man to be ever on guard against, to be under the suspicion of every honest mind. There was danger on the path one trod with him—when he made least sign, he might be most preparing for his spring. And yet was I not prejudging him—was I even certain that Herbert Vaughan was the man who had met Letty Ray that night? Granted even that it was the man, why should I suddenly fear danger at all in his path, to all opposed to his interests? He was a young man, and this girl might have thrown herself in his way; she was vain and impulsive—one incident might have followed upon another until the old, old story was played to the last chapter. Then Letty's pride saved her, although her despair hurried her away to the water.

Vaughan was a young man open to flattery, might not in the first instance have intended more than a few compliments, but have gone step by step on the devil's road, meaning no particular harm, swayed by the feelings of the moment, which rendered it pleasant to mark the evidence of this girl's growing affection for him. Then the old temptation, the false step towards the abyss, and an unforeseen end to the story. I would make allowances for Vaughan's youth, for the temptation which the girl might have offered by her manner; I would not be hasty and condemn that man.

The next morning it all appeared more dream-like than ever. Every-day life went on at the Ferry Inn in the old course. I could not believe that the Angel of death had been face to face with Letty last night. She had the enviable heart of repressing her emotion; of hiding the torture of her heart by an apathy beneath which it was impossible to guess what affected her. She might have seemed, in my eyes, that morning a little more thoughtful; her face have been expressive of a set determination to confront the new world on which she had entered, and not shrink from the stern realities that had met her there. But to those who knew nothing of the troubled workings of her heart, she was the every-day Letty; she played her part like a clever actress, who had studied the matter deeply, and was not

likely to make a mistake in one word, or in one bit of by-play which she had taught herself to perform.

Before I went away that morning to the building, I felt that I betrayed my astonishment too much. Letty followed me to the door and said :

"You have been studying my face very intently this morning. What did you expect to see there?"

"A shade of sorrow for last night's madness, Letty, a shade of——"

"Despair at the dull life before me," she added; "you haven't studied us women very deeply, Mr. Gear. The peasant girl as well as the duchess is a good hand at the mask when there's a world of dark thought to hide. Don't look at me so hard again or my mother's sharp eyes will see more than you do."

I was going away, when she said :

"I haven't thanked you for saving my life. I am sorry for the act—glad for the chance that threw you in my way. Letty Ray has much to live for yet."

She turned abruptly away, and went into the best room to clear away the breakfast things. I went along the road towards the building.

On that day, and for a fortnight afterwards, we went bravely on with the house; the extra hundred men were found and set at work, and there were vigilant eyes upon the amount of labour performed. Still I could see that the mansion would not be finished—that the shell of it alone, by incessant application, might stand a new feature in Nettlewood landscape. A room or two might even be rendered habitable—should be rendered habitable—but that there would remain a mass of unfinished material, was natural and to be expected. The next time I met Mrs. Zitman, for her health's sake, I must persuade her to remain a little while longer in the house she was so eager to quit.

During that fortnight I did not see her. The north-east wind continued scouring down the vale—every night there seemed a hurricane at Nettlewood; one was awakened by the roaring of the wind, and the unceasing rattle of the windows in their frames.

At the expiration of a fortnight after the departure of Mr. Vaughan to London—to the very day I remembered afterwards—the gaunt female attendant at Nettlewood House asked to see me at the Ferry Inn. It was eight in the evening, and I was busy in "the best bed-room," writing home to my mother—a loving soul who was not happy in her mind if I did not write home twice a week.

Letty showed her into the room at my request.

"Well, Janet, no bad news I hope?" was my first question.

"Na," in a hesitative manner, "na bad news, exactly."

"What is the matter, then? Mrs. Zitman——"

"Wants to see ye. And ye'd better coom at ance, or she'll be after me in a flash like."

"Certainly—I will come."

I put the letter away in my desk, which I left unlocked, and prepared to accompany Long Janet to Nettlewood House. Passing out of the room, we came upon Mrs. Ray in suspicious contiguity to the outer side of the door.

"I was just a-coming to ask if anything had happened at the House," she said, quietly.

Long Janet shook her head.

"Naithin', Mrs. Ray," she answered, sternly.

"What's wanted with Mr. Gear at this time of night, then? He'll catch his death of cold, after settling down afore the fire."

"I'll take care of my health, Mrs. Ray."

"Mrs. Zitman's not ill?" she asked.

"Not ill!" echoed the serving woman.

"Oh! dear, what *can* it be then?" moaned the old woman, giving up in despair her efforts to solve the mystery.

We heard her repeating this important question to herself when we were outside in the wind, and had closed the inn door behind us. We heard the door open also, the instant afterwards, and were very well assured that the weazen face of the old woman was watching our departure so long as our figures remained distinct from the dark night.

"That be an unpleasant auld woman," commented Janet, as she trudged on at my side, taking infinitely longer strides than myself.

"Slightly curious, that's all."

"She hac an eevil een. I can see the deevil shining oot o' it whene'er I coom across her."

"She's old and peevish, Janet."

"Gin I war like that, I'd put mysel' vera quietly oot o' the wa'."

She strode on, making no further comment, offering to throw no further light on the reason for my sudden call to Mrs. Zitman's house.

When we were close upon the great swing gafe she condescended to address me again.

"Are ye a narvous mon?"

"I hope not—I think not."

"Do ye understand narves?"

"A little. My mother is a nervous woman in her way."

"Ye'll do then, for ye will na laugh at her."

"Is Mrs. Zitman suffering from a nervous attack, then?"

"May na' she weel be that, living a' alane in the deesmallest hoose that e'er a mon built," she said indignantly; "she who a' her leef ha' been delicate and full o' fancies. It only wanted ane friend to strengthen her wi' a stronger natur than her ain, and she ne'er

got it. A's been agin her fra' the time I nussed her in my arms a wee thing."

"Indeed?" I answered. I was curious enough, or anxious enough to put my remark in an interrogative sense. The clue to finding an antidote for Mrs. Zitman's unhappiness might suggest itself when I knew more of her story.

"Ay—indeed it ha' Her father and mither war twa nervous critters, and e'er gave a sool the horrors—sharp eno' in their weets when the horrors warn a on 'em, though. I ne'er gat my lawfu' salary to this day. Then Mary——"

"Mary?"

"Mrs. Zitman as is—I ca' her Mary when we're alone thegither, ye must ken—got married to the rich mon who'd been in furrin parts, and he was narvous too, and na comfort to her. That's how it is."

"But her brother Herbert?"

"Narvous—narvous," she repeated twice.

I could not help expressing my doubts of that assertion.

"Guid bless him, but he is! He's my ain bairn; I weaned that laddie, and ken him weel as my ain richt hand. A better lad dinna live."

"Indeed."

"What do ye keep sayin' *indeed* for?" she asked sharply; "dinna ye beleeve what I say?"

"Why should I doubt you, Janet?" I answered; "I know nothing of Mr. Vaughan, and he has spent his life with you."

"Mark this, that he's the vera best o' men—that I say it to ye—that it will be alwa' proved sae, whate'er people may think o' him, or ha' to say agin him. A' his life's been a study for ithers, na' for hissel'. He may be seengular in his wa', and e'en she mayna understand him sometimes; but he means weel, though he gangs a different gait to wark to maist people. If it e'er cooms, which it weel," she added, sadly, "to partin' wi' ane or t'ither o' the bairnies, I shud brak my heart gin' I left him, which I wadna—never!"

The woman stamped upon the gravelled drive, and flung one long arm in the air like a telegraph signal in her excitement. I could not understand her. This new exposition of Vaughan's character was startling, and took away my breath. It was not compatible with all that I had suspected; and yet this woman, who was in earnest, had been with him from his cradle side. Every step forward seemed to bring the gloom more thickly on me; here was an impenetrable density, or was it a new light that dazzled me and disturbed my reasoning faculties?

In my astonishment I had almost forgotten the object of my visit, till she touched my arm as we stood under the portico.

"Tell her gude news aboot the hoose," she whispered, huskily; "and talk her, if you can, oot o' a' the foolishness."

"Have you failed, Janet?"

"Ech, but I'm as narvous as a kitten too. I ha' na lived wi' the family sic a mony years without catchin' the complaint. My faither, who was a Scotchman, banged me mony times for it before he deed. Guid save him! I think he banged it into my pow rather than oot."

A male servant opened the door, and looked surprised at my appearance. He stood with the door open, gaping vacantly at us, until Janet bade him make haste and shut the wind out of the house. After this exordium Janet preceded me to the drawing-room, announcing me in her usual manner:

"Mr. Gear's coom."

CHAPTER IV.

A NERVOUS DISORDER.

I ENTERED with the serving-woman, who closed the door, and advanced with me towards the slight figure in the damask-covered chair by the fireside.

I could see her face brighten as I advanced towards her. Shut up in that house, a prisoner for so long a time, the sight of one from the outer world, where the north-east wind blew, was a relief to her. Closer to her I saw that the face was paler than its wont, and that the anxious look which I had noted there, was more predominant at that time than I had ever seen it.

"I am glad that you have come," she said, with a sigh of relief, "I have been anxious to hear what progress you have made. Sit down, Mr. Gear, and tell me every word."

She dropped a little wearily into her chair again, and signalled me to take the seat before the fire. I obeyed the implied wish, and Janet Muckersie took up her station on the reverse side, facing her mistress, and with her head against the marble mantelpiece.

"Janet is my friend and companion in Herbert's absence," she said to me, as though explaining her presence there; "we talk all the evening of the old times' when we lived farther down the Vale in the little cottage close to Henlock."

An involuntary sigh escaped her. The little cottage, where she

was a poor solicitor's daughter, was a happy retrospect, a home to be regretted in the days of her great wealth and young widowhood.

"We have made great progress, Mrs. Zitman."

"Ah! you promised me that you would," she said, with a pleased smile.

"I have increased the expenses to a considerable extent, Mrs. Zitman, in my desire to keep that promise to you."

"Any expense—any expense to see the last of this house!"

"Totally neglectful of your warning not to be too extravagant, I have ordered a hundred extra men upon the works."

"Oh! thank you."

"And, after all, I can only promise you a roof to the house and two or three habitable rooms, which I dare not recommend you, for your health's sake, to inhabit."

"I will chance it," she said, firmly.

"I hope that you will seriously reflect upon the matter."

"Mr. Gear," with a strange look in her great grey eyes, "do you believe in haunted houses?"

"I do not."

"This house is full of noises. When I cross the landing to my bed-room, I do so with fearlest hands should clutch me in my progress; I see strange figures in shadowy corners of the rooms; I pray for daylight ere the night has scarcely come, sir. What is this?—a disease?"

"A weakness caused by the solitary nature of your life."

"Then it will never get better. In the new house as in the old, it will pursue me."

"I hope not. A great deal of these fancies, by a strong effort of your will, could, I am sure, be shaken off."

"Oh! I have tried all my life, so hard, sir! And I *have* a strong will of my own, and am quick to solve the mystery of a noise that startles half the household. Is not that true, Janet?"

"True as the Gaspel. Why, the noise we heard last night, ye guessed at better nor a buik. It war the rock splittin' at the back o' the hoose, that's a' "

"The rock splitting!" I exclaimed.

"The water in the rock arter the thaw, rather than the rock itself," explained Janet; "and bein' close aboon us, it sounds oddly, noo and then. Mrs. Zitman guessed it at ance—she and her brither coom o' a family that see thro' things vera clearly."

"But the window, Janet—the window of my room open in the morning!"

"Deed, and I did shut it," said Janet, with a shiver; "that's a thing which will poozle me till my dying day."

"You would rather keep me nervous, Janet, than own to that omission. You never forget, you say," she said, half-jestingly.

Janet raised her long arm in the air, her great red hand emphatically upon her knee the moment afterwards.

"I ne'er forget. In a' my life I ne'er forgat ane thing wairth rememberin'. Ye, my Mary, dinna ken a' that I ha' treasured oop."

The woman's expression of countenance was remarkable—the hard lines vanished; there was a look of sadness on her face, that was touching by its very earnestness; there were tears in the eyes generally so steely and unsympathetic.

"No bad thoughts of me, Janet."

"Guid bless ye, my lassie, na!"

"We will not say anything more about the window," Mrs. Zitman said, soothingly.

"Na; but we'll baith think o't, because it's na understandable at a' It'll mak' my head ache mony a lang day. I'll swear tae shuttin' the window, and, what's mair, to knackin' o'er the alabaster feegur doin' it, an' catchin' it before it reached the grund—sae!"

She indicated the principle of catching suddenly at anything, in a very characteristic manner.

"Well," with a little shiver, "we will say no more about it."

"It's gien ye a cough, at a time when coughs are dangerous. I'm ganging to ask aboot it, doon stairs, and pretty sharply tae, mind ye."

"We are wearying Mr. Gear," said Mrs. Zitman, turning to me again, "and he has to tell me all about the house, and his kind exertions in my behalf."

There was little to relate that was interesting, but she listened with great intentness, and thanked me very warmly when I had concluded, for my efforts in her service.

"You are a faithful servant, sir,—more, let me add, a faithful friend."

"Of both titles I am proud, madam."

"There must have been something more than common in the determination which led my brother to assert that your plan was the best sent in for competition. It was a long argument between us before I gave in, and let him have his way. Ah! Janet, I begin to fear he has his way too often."

"The bairn kens best. Is na he alwa' in the richt?"

"You think so, Janet?"

"Tae be sure. Why shudna I, for that matter?"

Mrs. Zitman had piqued my curiosity rather suddenly, and by a left-handed blow had come a shock to my vanity, which startled me considerably.

"You will pardon me, Mrs. Zitman, but you were speaking of the plans sent in for competition."

"Will you pardon *me* if I confess frankly that I did not admire your plan in the first instance?"

"I am very sorry," I confessed.

"We had many debates on the subject, Herbert and I. There were three plans of superior merit to the rest we thought—yours was

one. We asked no judge to decide for us—my brother is a little of an artist, as he is a little of everything in his way. Of the three set aside for further consideration, I chose one sent in under the signature of 'Esperans.' My brother warmly supported yours. After a while I gave way to him, though he failed to convince me. There, Mr. Gear, see what it is to have a friend at court."

"Yes," I answered, thoughtfully.

"Would you like to see Esperans's plans?"

"Very much."

"Before they were sent home, I copied the perspective view, as a *souvenir* of the pleasant excitement this competition scheme kept up for awhile. It was a weapon of warfare ready to my hand, if Herbert and I ever fell into argument again. The woman's last word, Mr. Gear!"

She rose, and crossed the room to a little marqueterie table, from the drawer of which she drew forth a little coloured copy of the unfortunate Esperans's sketch in perspective. Resuming her seat she passed the sketch to me, with a more than common anxiety, with a hand that verily trembled, I believed. I took it from her, and attentively examined it.

There was a long pause; Mrs. Zitman watching every movement of my face.

"Well?" she said at last, in her impatience.

"Mrs. Zitman, I have robbed this man of two hundred and fifty pounds," I answered, in a voice which faltered somewhat, in spite of me.

"You say so—you think so?"

"The sketch, in point of general design, is as much above my own, as the work of a Titian is above the daub of a novice. This is a work of genius, and should have gained the prize, Mrs. Zitman. I have stepped in like a robber, and stolen it from him."

"No, Mr. Gear, not so bad as that. The competitors were to abide by our decision, and it was made in your favour.

"Unfairly," I responded.

"No—don't say that."

"This man may be in poverty, Mrs. Zitman; may have wasted time he could not spare, or wasted health by overtime far into the night; may have prayed for his success, or for his one chance in a life that had been an arduous struggle with him. He may have put forth all his strength to this task, believing in the fairness of the project—and his plans are returned as unworthy of the prize for which he strove! It is a cruel favouritism that excludes the best, although it is too often practised in all professions, madam."

"You speak warmly—you are an honest man, Mr. Gear."

"I don't feel one to night."

"You take a false view of the case."

"No."

"A Quixotic one."

Seeing my face flush, she said, hastily,

"Forgive me, I did not mean that. I am not often satirical, now I have lost all my old spirits. Give me the plan, Mr. Gear—I am sorry that I showed it to you."

"The superintendence of the work was not promised in the advertisement, and I do not feel to have betrayed him there—but that two hundred and fifty pounds——"

"If you say another word you will offend me," she exclaimed, impetuously; "if you think of giving up that money—I read it in your face—I will never speak to you again."

"But——"

If you will know a secret unknown to my brother, and that secret will set your mind at ease, it must be. Wait a moment."

She had left the room the instant afterwards. Janet and I looked at each other, the former smiling grimly at her precipitation.

"She's forgotten a' about the dark landin' and the hoorrid moonlight that stales in at the stooody winder," she chuckled; "I suppose it be the stooody where the lassie's gane noo."

Mrs. Zitman was back again with that portion of a banker's cheque-book termed professionally the stump end—that is the portion left after the cheques are torn out, and on which portion is a brief transcript of amounts paid away by the cheques aforesaid. This for the instruction of any unfortunate reader whose means are below cheque-drawing, and banker's accounts.

"Here, Mr. Gear; now, let the matter rest, to oblige me."

The mutilated cheque-book was in my hands; on the counterfoil was written—"Esperans, £250."

She laughed at my surprise. How the musical ripple of that laugh welled through the room, and seemed to scare its somebreeness away! The grim smile of satisfaction once again appeared on the face of Janet—in a different world, with different hopes, what a change would come to this girlish figure standing by me!

"My brother had his way, and Esperans, who I learned afterwards was a rich man with a large practice, obtained his two hundred and fifty pounds. But you will not betray me to Herbert?"

"I have no right to mention this, Mrs. Zitman, but——"

"There, there, the subject is dismissed. Let me soothe your wounded vanity by telling you my brother could see no talent in Esperans's performances, and that I —— why, that I am very glad you are here at Nettlewood instead of him."

The subject was dismissed; the time-piece ticking on the mantel-shelf warned me of the long stay I had made, and suggested that Herbert Vaughan might have objected to it, in his absence. I rose to take my departure.

"Going?" she said, with her old weariness of look apparent again.

"If you will allow me."

"He need na keep awa sae lang agin," said Janet, looking at her mistress, "ye will be glad to hear about the new hoose, lassie?"

"Yes," she answered, turning quickly to me.

I could not resist the temptation to say that I would call again very shortly, *on business*. She did not answer, save by a smile, but I was more than satisfied. I took no credit to my own abilities for her desire to see me there; I knew too well that I was a break in the day's monotony, and so welcome to her for that reason. *For no other!*

I had shaken hands with her, when she said very suddenly—

"You will think me a very nervous woman, Mr. Gear, but I have an odd suspicion," sinking her voice to a whisper, "that this house is watched."

"In what manner?" I ejaculated.

"From without—in the high road, on the lawn in front. Not watched persistently, as though Janet and I were prisoners who might be tempted to escape, but watched at uncertain intervals. *The house was watched last night, sir.*"

She had turned very pale—Janet clasping her two hands together, sat rigid with horror at this new suggestion of her mistress. I felt a slight chilling of the blood myself, but it was more at the scared face of this fair woman than at any fears conjured up by her remark. Those nerves would drive her mad in time, I thought.

At the same moment, a means of calming her fears suggested itself.

"If Mrs. Zitman will allow me to watch this house in my turn once a night, at uncertain intervals too—I am partial to a stroll after supper—and if I can assure you that once a night I shall be in the vicinity of Nettlewood House, perhaps you will be less subject to these morbid fancies."

"You think me very childish?" she said.

"No," I answered; "in so great a mansion, seeing so little change, it is natural to entertain some fears."

"I was a timid girl—it is natural, too, that I should not be a very confident woman."

"Quite natural."

"Then don't think me childish, if I say that I accept your kind offer very gratefully—that with the knowledge of one true friend on the watch, I shall feel strengthened very much. Mr. Gear, I rely upon you. When you spoke so coolly of giving up two hundred and fifty pounds, I knew that you were a brave man."

"Far from brave, Mrs. Zitman."

"You will serve me, then, in this?"

"It will be the happiest service of my life."

That escaped me, but her bright eyes had bewildered me long since, and to see her face change so rapidly, so eloquently, did not

conduce to my composure. That sowed the first suspicion there too—I saw it in the tell-tale blood which mounted to her cheeks, in the surprise which those eyes shone with on the instant.

“Good night,” she said, a little abruptly.

“Good night, Mrs. Zitman.”

“I rely upon you,” she added, when I was at the door.

I bowed, but did not speak again. The door shut between us, and closed the interview.

There was a light in the corridor leading to the passage—some one flitted away as I passed from the drawing-room. Was it accident, or were there watchers in the house as well as out—household skies on every word and action? The door opened again, and Janet followed me towards the hall. In the hall-chair asleep was the man who had admitted us—a pock-marked man, whom I had never regarded with much favour.

“A sleepin’ carl as ever war,” muttered Janet, after a disparaging elevation of her nose towards him; “fine sarvants are alwa’ fine and lazy, and that’s truth.”

“Good night, Janet,” I said, after she had opened the door for me.

“Gude nicht to ye, Mr. Gear. Ye’ll coom again?”

“Yes—presently.”

“She be glad to see ye—ye’re a relief, and what’s better, a friend too. Think how dull she is alane here, sir—only a young lassie, noo.”

“Mr. Vaughan must be considered, Janet. It is scarcely etiquette to call here in his absence.”

“Am I na with the maistress alwa’?—Is she na bein’ killed by inches here?”

“Well, I have promised to come. Good night, Janet.”

“Gude nicht. Ye ha’ made a promees too that’ll mak’ twa meeserable wimen sleep soonder in their beds.”

She banged the door upon me to cut off the admission of the north-easter, ever on the watch for entrance, and I went homewards, beset by an army of new thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. RAY APPEALS TO MY FEELINGS.

THERE was a mystery somewhere, and there was danger in its midst, I thought, as I went home that night. Amidst the many thoughts born of that one interview, that suspicion possessed me most on my homeward route, and kept the foremost place.

Presently there would be a change of position—much to make me unsettled, to fill me with a vague sense of pleasure at being her guardian, her faithful watch-dog, to bay at the fancies which her heated mind created, or to hunt down the spy who haunted her. There were thoughts, too, of all that I had said that night—of all the changing shades of nature very winning, very lovable, and which entranced me more and more.

I went home to the Ferry Inn in rather a dream-like condition; I pushed open the door of my room suddenly, and came upon Mrs. Ray standing before my desk, holding on by the table with one hand, and retaining in her disengaged claw the letter I had begun to my mother in the other. Bending down to place the epistle in closer proximity to the light, and glaring at the first page through glasses framed with tortoiseshell half an inch in width, she looked by the candlelight a witch at some unholy task. There was a cat rubbing its head against her elbow, to complete the similitude—a grey mongrel, which I had detested utterly from the first morning that I had fallen over it coming down the stairs to breakfast.

The coolness with which Mrs. Ray received me, was only equalled by the impertinence of her curiosity.

"I'm thinking it's not such a bad handwriting, Mr. Gear," she said, looking up as I entered.

"No, it's not bad," I answered, drily; "what do you think of the style?"

"Oh! I ain't read a line," was the reply, as she placed the letter on my desk; "only coming in to tidy up a bit, and finding the desk open——"

"Shut—surely!"

"Oh! no—open, Mr. Gear."

This was too much for my power of endurance.

"I assure you, Mrs. Ray, I closed that desk."

"It might have been shut—it might have been open," she said, shifting her ground of argument, "it's of no consequence—there's nothing in the letter! Sit down, young man, and don't look so cross about it. Come to the fire here, and listen to what's been troubling a poor soul so long."

The old woman dropped into a chair, and folded her hands in her lap. Her pitying look towards me was a strange one; instinctively I sat down facing her.

"Mr. Gear," she began, "you're a handsome man—summut worn with a pile of hard thoughts like me, but young and handsome yet."

"Thank you for your flattering opinion, Mrs. Ray."

I said it sternly, to check further allusion to a subject which I fancied was about to be forced upon me. But the old woman in her eagerness, appeared to take no notice.

"When you first came here, I told you of a fair lady that it was possible to win," she said; "will you tell one, old enough to be your grandmother amost, if you have won her yet?"

"No."

"You see her very often—she sends for you now boldly, as if not ashamed of you. Mr. Gear, she's fallen in love with you!"

"You are wrong."

"If you will only say she has, I'll pray for your good luck as I never prayed in all my life. Oh! if you will only say that there's a chance of making her your wife, sir!"

"There is no chance, Mrs. Ray."

"She is a woman worth the loving—she's a handsome woman, with a heart that ony longs to love some one worthy of her," this old witch whined.

"She is a woman as far above my reach or any poor ambition of mine, as the stars in the heavens overhead," I said; "she lives in a world apart from mine, and the daring of my thoughts ventures not thither to scare her with my vain audacity."

"But, sir—sir," Mrs. Ray began eagerly, "she——"

"Would be a poor woman, if it were in my power to win her for a wife. I know the story, Mrs. Ray."

"Who told you that?"

"Her brother."

"He tried to scare you from the ring-dove early in the day, the villain!" she muttered; "he told you more than that: of the chances for me and mine, if she died or married. Well, that's all true, sir, every letter of it, and if the money was mine, I shouldn't be hard upon her. You and I a-talking here quietly may see the way to a fortune for us both. How many thousands, now, could I afford to give you for your share in winning back my rights? Do think of it—pray think of it, young man! Look at my poverty and rags, and think what might bless my poor old age—think of your own chance, and of that woman being ground to death by a brother who thinks only of hisself. Ha!—you jump at that—you're falling in love with Mary Zitman fast!"

"Leave the room, woman!" I cried, starting to my feet, "you insult me by your poor temptation."

"You will save her life by marrying her—I swear to you she'll die

a madwoman—raving mad with fear—if you don't step in to save her! Sit down—oh! do sit down agin—and talk it over with me! I'm an old woman, and can read a woman's heart—it is easily got at by a careful man."

"Mrs. Ray, you *must* go!"

"There's a fair world for you and me, sir—we can help each other much, and make everything so different atween us! I don't mind what I promise, if you'll try the plan I have brooded on to win her. Do'ee sit down again, dear Mr. Gear!"

I shook my head.

"If you don't leave me I must go up-stairs. I can't—I will *not* bear this!" I cried, stamping my foot upon the floor.

"You're hard on an old woman. You won't listen—my God! why can't you listen to me?"

"You betray yourself and your own sordid lust for Mrs. Zitman's fortune. You insult me grievously."

"Why?"

"You would set me scheming for that poor woman's affections; you would teach me, if it were in your power, how to play the traitor to her; and how to drag her down to the sordid level which you think my nature. If I hear another word of this, in any way I must part company for ever."

"Oh! dear!"

I went to the door, and she got up, and made a dash towards me. Had I not escaped into the outer air, I believe that she would have gone down on her knees, and prayed me to listen to her sinful schemes. But I escaped, and went on along the high road, thankful that there had been no voice to tempt me from her withered lips—that the shadow of Zitman's money did not fall for an instant on the purity of my love for Zitman's widow. I went back to Nettlewood House, and fulfilled my first vigil there. All was still and silent as the grave, in the murky depths of which such love of mine must rest eternally.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBLE WATCH.

ONCE a night, at least, I paid a visit to Nettlewood House. Generally at a late hour, when those who menaced danger might be thinking that the time was fitting for them. Once a night in any weather, under any circumstances, I found my way to Mrs. Zitman's house, strong in my power to protect her. Once a week I called at the mansion, generally in the morning, to report progress, and to receive cheques for the payment of the men. The builder made out his account for wages on the Friday afternoon; so that it was generally on the Saturday morning that Mrs. Zitman's cheques were given me, and my information afforded her. The builder received the cheques and paid his men after his own fashion, consequently there was no occasion to seek Mr. Wenford's assistance in cashing the drafts, a step recommended by Herbert Vaughan prior to his departure.

A month passed away—no sign of Herbert Vaughan's reappearance was made at Nettlewood. The October, then the November weather rendered progress uncertain at the building; for days together the frost set in now, and kept all hands idle. Once Mrs. Zitman ventured forth, in defiance of the fiercest north-easter that had blown down the valley that year, and surprised me by her presence at the new house.

It had been freezing for three days, and the workmen that morning had stayed at home at Henlock. The carriage of Mrs. Zitman drew up before the works, whilst I was wandering somewhat idly about them, regretting the time lost by inaction. The window of the carriage was lowered, and the fair young face looked therefrom. I hastened towards it.

"I feared this, Mr. Gear," she said, with a sad glance at the deserted works; "if the frost continue, what becomes of my hope to settle down here—to begin my new life here with the new year?"

"I think there are symptoms of a thaw apparent."

"They will come from Henlock this afternoon if the frost breaks up. I will drive to Henlock at once, and see the builder," she said, impatiently.

"Ye'd better coom hame," said the hoarse voice of Janet, sitting very erect and rigid on the opposite side, with a black beaver bonnet tilted sideways through contact with the carriage roof; "p'raps if Mr. Gear hae naething better to do, he'll coom hame too, and keep us company."

"Oh! he is always very busy," said Mrs. Zitman, with a timid

glance towards me. It was a glance that made my heart leap, and said 'Come,' and yet I was strong-minded enough to refuse, to plead an excuse that business to which she had alluded.

Long Janet rewarded me for my firmness by a most demoniacal frown. The woman's anxiety to throw me into Mrs. Zitman's company began to become noticeable; surely she was old enough to see the danger of it, to guess what might befall me if I saw her mistress more frequently. After all, she was a woman of very little consideration or delicacy of feeling; or, in her anxiety to keep her mistress from too much loneliness, she cared only for me as one whose conversation might help to wile away the hours that passed so heavily at home.

"I think we will go to Henlock, then," suggested Mrs. Zitman.

"I'm thinkin' ye'll be as mad to attempt it as ye war mad to coom oot the mornin'."

"We have the carriage."

"Ay, and the carriage winder oopen," added Janet, with a shudder.

"Well, we will go back again," she said, with a sigh, "if you will be so hard with me, Janet. Mr. Gear," pausing in the act of drawing up the carriage window, and speaking in a lower tone, "I must thank you very much for that constant watch of yours. I am ashamed of the trouble I have given you, and am anxious to relieve you from the task.

"I feel a satisfaction in my silent visits, that I hope you will not deprive me of."

"After all, they were but nervous fancies of mine, Mr. Gear. I have shaken them off now."

"Still, with your permission, I will keep my watch here for the little time longer that I remain at Nettlewood."

"For the little time," she said, impetuously; "what, are you thinking of leaving us, Mr. Gear?"

"My part at least is nearly played out here, Mrs. Zitman. With the completion of the roof will follow the completion of my task."

"Yes, yes—I had forgotten"

She drew the window hastily up, and leaned back in the carriage away from me. In another moment I was standing alone there, left to the pressure of business which had been my excuse for depriving me of the happiness of a visit to Nettlewood House.

The frost broke up late that afternoon; too late for the men to come from Henlock to their work. Work began anew on the following day—life ran on in the old groove—Mrs. Ray no more persisted in her suggestions for making my fortune, but eyed me malevolently from a distance, as one who might have done her a good turn, and had been obstinate enough to turn my back upon her. Letty Ray working diligently during the morning, and brooding over the peat fire in the evening, was an every-day figure, which it seemed impossible could have a romantic side to it. We were nearing December at last, and still

Herbert Vaughan remained in London, and left his sister in her great house alone.

I continued my watch night after night; those lonely vigils in the neighbourhood of Nettlewood House did more to shake my resolution not to think of her, than I imagined at the time. There was a stepping apart from business life in them; there was the romance apart from business fostered in my silent watch.

Now and then it happened that the fall of a branch, the rustle of a leaf, suggested some intruder on the Nettlewood estate; but my search was vigorous and unprofitable, and the sword-stick which I carried with me came not into requisition for defensive purposes. In the first week of December there was at least an incident of a new character to render my watching less monotonous. It had come on a storm of wind and rain at six in the evening; one of those fitful storms which every half hour give signs of intermission, and then disappoint one expectant of fair weather by setting in wilder and more boisterous. Still it was a night to tempt me out—a night when villainy might stalk abroad, confident of no watchers on its nefarious business. Mrs. Ray took note of my departure, as usual; I could see her head revolving round towards her shoulder, as I struggled with the wind in my efforts to close the inn door after me.

With some difficulty I made my way down the road, along which the wind swooped with a violence, that rendered keeping one's feet a matter of some difficulty. It was a night that raised my spirits; there was resistance to my progress, and my cheek flushed to meet it. I felt more strong to encounter the unseen enemy who had eluded me so long—more able to cope with him, for Mary Zitman's sake. Before I went away for good, I was romantic enough to wish for some opportunity to distinguish myself in her service—to prove to her that I had not watched for nothing—or let a chance escape of playing the defender. And yet I was anxious to believe that there was no mystery abroad, save that which a nervous fancy had engendered—that Mary Zitman only required new scenes, a few faithful friends, to grow more brave, to look less troubled by unguessed at cares.

In the wind and rain I took up my post before the house that night, standing in the shadow of the high oaken fence, which separated the estate from the high road, ending in a rock. Waiting thus, the second watcher came almost without warning upon me—leaped the oaken fence, and stood before me struggling with the wind, that in his spring had found its way beneath the heavy horseman's cloak he wore. For a few moments we glared at each other—each on guard and prepared for attack; it was not until a few moments had intervened, that from under the hat tightly pressed over his forehead, I recognized in the darkness the features of "Mad Wenford."

"Mr. Wenford!" I exclaimed then.

"Mr. Gear!" he answered.

"Pardon me," I said, "but may I ask the reason for your presence here?"

"May I ask yours, fellow?" he cried; "what is the secret of your dodging about here night after night?"

"How do you know it is night after night?"

"No matter—I do know it."

"If you will reply fairly to my question, Mr. Wenford," I said, "I will answer yours."

I knew that he was straining his eyes very hard to see my face; I felt that there was a suppressed passion struggling with the man, and it kept me careful of him. I loosened my sword in its stick instinctively.

"My reason, Mr. Gear, is to look after you. I have been told of this new game of yours, and I think it requires explanation. Now?"

I disregarded the imperious style of his address, and answered him.

"I guard this house at the wish of its proprietress," I said, in my turn; "there have been strange noises heard about here, and stranger incidents, it has been hinted to me, have occurred. To discover a solution to the mystery, I have watched here for a short time every night—I think I am approaching that solution, Mr. Wenford."

He disregarded my meaning peroration; he drew his cloak more tightly round him, and coolly took his place side by side with me against the oaken fence.

"This is an odd affair. This is more odd than I believed."

The handle of a riding whip made its appearance from his cloak, and he proceeded to nibble at it thoughtfully.

"I'm not very quick at catching at ideas," he added, "don't interrupt me yet awhile, man."

I had no intention of disturbing his reverie. I was glad for a little grave deliberation myself. Wenford's puzzled air helped to puzzle me in my turn.

He collected his ideas at last.

"I believe you," he said, suddenly, "it agrees with Mrs. Zitman's nervousness, and you haven't been a man to wear a mask since I have known you. By ——!" he said, violently, "the wrong scent that led me astray was the fancy that you had fallen in love with *her*."

"And if I had done so?"

"It had been more than your life's worth—I warned you of the danger of it, Gear."

"Had I been inclined to fall in love with Mrs. Zitman, I do not think I should have considered very seriously your warning."

"You are too rash—you venture too much on ground that is forbidden," he said, passionately. "Why did not Mrs. Zitman ask me to keep watch here instead of you? I would have served her better."

I did not reply to this.

"You have watched here some weeks, Gear. What have you heard?"

"Nothing."

"Gear," he cried, suddenly, "I believe that there has been knavery at work—that there are enemies working in the dark against that woman."

"You think this?"

"Hers is a valuable life—on her death depends a great deal. By all that's holy, it can't be all fancy of the child's! But," with another oath, and an impatient stamp of his foot, "why are you set to watch here, instead of one who would have been as faithful as a hound in her service? That keeps me in the dark still."

"I am in the dark also, Mr. Wenford," I said; "there are spies set upon my actions, you have confessed—there is a complex machinery at work for or against me, which I resent—which I will not have!"

"This is a fine place for a secret society," he said, tauntingly. "Why, man, if you come this way every night, it is the most likely thing to be talked about in this place. The very dead in Henlock churchyard are glad of a gossip for a change! Take my advice, Mr Gear, and resign your watch to me. I swear to God it will be a faithful one."

"I resign my post to no one."

"Mr. Gear," he said, his tall form towering above me, "you are a mystery to me at present. I don't know whether you will be a friend or an enemy—I have been inclined to think you one, and then the other—you puzzle me, you puzzle more than me! You cross my path at awkward times, when that mad fit is on me, which people talk about down here. At night you trouble my dreams, wherein you are always thwarting me, standing between me and every thing I wish. I am a dangerous man—they would tell you in the Vale that there are times when I stick at nothing. Be on your guard!"

"I will, sir."

"Be trebly on your guard, if you think of loving a woman that I've loved, or grasping at a prize that I have failed to reach. The day of reckoning will come swiftly on you, or Ned Wenford will be greatly changed."

His boasting did not affect me much. To me it seemed the idle raving of a braggart, with no power to scare me from my purpose.

"Mr. Wenford, all this scarce needs a reply."

"I fight openly—I warn my enemy that I am on his track. Mr. Gear, beware of me!"

He shook the gloved hand which grasped the whip menacingly at me, and then strode away down the road. I could hear him muttering his threats to the wind and rain as they met him full front upon his journey home.

Thinking him more of a madman than ever, I followed him in his wake a short while afterwards.

CHAPTER VII.

CARRIED AWAY.

IN the middle of December the roof was on the new house at Nettlewood; the building was completed, the architect's work was over. The north-east wind had suddenly vacated the valley, the frost had broken up, and a warm moist air had offered wonderful facilities for work. Old Cumberland folk—and there were many amongst the workmen on the place—professed never to have remembered so mild a time following on so sharp a season; it was like spring weather. All the snow on the mountain tops vanished away again, and the strip of meadow land on each side of Nettlewood Vale looked green and bright in its new youth.

Mrs. Zitman came every day to the works once more; the pale face became less delicate, the troubled looks thereon perceptibly diminished, the light and life natural to one of her years played about her steps, and rendered her, in her impulsiveness and brightness, a woman to be worshipped more than ever.

I forced myself to believe that I was glad my task had so rapidly attained completion—that I should spend my Christmas with my mother and sister, far away from the birth-place of my one romance. There was temptation in this lonely spot, and it grew a stronger enemy to cope with; in the crowded London streets, which country people thought were fraught with danger would be peace of mind and security for me. Away from her, the sober every-day existence would come back; it would not be difficult—that was, not so very difficult—to live down the fantasy which had utterly transformed me!

I had been ever a dreamer in my way, but this was the wildest vision that a man could foster. The romance had begun too late in life, and was of too much power to die out easily, and give no pain to me. My own feeling of despair as the days grew less at Nettlewood should have warned me of the fallacy—possibly *did* warn me, though I closed my eyes, and went on blindly to the end.

The end came at last, before Herbert Vaughan's return.

The house was finished; a fresh staff of workmen and decorators were busy at four rooms on the south side, so that if Mrs. Zitman's intentions held good, she could at least take possession of a portion of the premises, and shake the dust of Nettlewood House from her feet.

The builder considered himself responsible for the interior of the

new edifice ; its adornments were beyond my province ; there was no further reason for my stay there.

Mrs. Ray received a weeks notice to quit from me. I went into the back room to deliver it. The old woman sitting in her usual place, received it stoically. Letty Ray, standing with one arm on the back of her mother's chair, looked towards me steadily, almost regretfully.

"I'm thinking, sir," she said, "that we shall be sorry to lose you—I hope you have been comfortable here."

"Everything has been very good, very clean, and very moderate. I have been obliged by a prompt attention to all my wishes. I have to thank you, Letty, for much kindness."

"Hark how patronizing he is," muttered the old woman ; "it's as good as a play!"

"You will be glad to leave here," said Letty, after an impatient shake to the chair, by way of a hint to her mother, who, however, took it unkindly, and 'dratted' her for an impudent thing, shaking her up like that. Old Mrs. Ray's true colours were displaying themselves rapidly ; my time was short ; little more was to be gained from me ; the recommendation of her house to my friends was not worth a halfpenny.

"You'll be glad to get home to your mother, Mr. Gear," she said, with a kind of sarcastic snarl at the fire, or at me, "and we shall be glad to have the inn to ourselves. Strange people trapesing about the place, and coming in at all times and seasons—in the middle of the night like a housebreaker, sometimes—are not to my taste, and though we must put up with all sorts, yet it *is* a comfort to know they're not going to worry us much longer."

"What time will you dine to-day, Mr. Gear?" inquired Letty, anxious to create a diversion and break in upon her mother's imperfectly concealed personalities.

"At five, I think."

Mrs. Ray began to address the fire again.

"Strange people, giving themselves airs, sometimes——"

"Good morning, Mr. Gear," said Letty, nodding towards me to curtail the interview, during the progress of which I had been at least amused.

"Good morning."

"We had a man here once," said Mrs. Ray, "who might have made his fortune, and who was a fool—who took his own counsel, which kept him a poor critter all his life. To a word of good advice he never listened, so he came to woe. A fool—the weakest of all fools, that man was!"

I was half-way down the passage before she had finished, but the old woman elevated her voice so that not a word should escape me. Outside, under the creaking sign-post, Letty followed me.

"You must not mind her, sir—she's old and querulous. All her

life she has been fighting against one disappointment, and hers is not a nature to be grateful. I don't think you mind her, Mr. Gear?"

"Not much," I said, laughing.

"I shall remember your kindness, your gentlemanly consideration for us poor Ferry-keepers. I remember more than that," she added, meaningly.

I was going away, when she said quickly:

"You understand what my mother meant by the good advice to which you had never listened?"

"Oh! yes—very well indeed."

"The hope of Mrs. Zitman's marriage has preyed upon her every minute since her brother's death—the hope of Mrs. Zitman's money shines for ever in the fire over which she broods. We Rays are covetous and grasping, and envy our neighbour's goods with a rare intensity."

She turned away after this hard criticism, and I went on to Nettlewood House.

To Nettlewood House for the last time, perhaps! I had been thinking of the visit many days, and had finally found courage to attempt it. Several times I had hinted to Mrs. Zitman my intention of departure, but by some inexplicable means the subject had ever turned to matters foreign to it. Now the formal notice must be given her too, and then the preparation for going away, made in earnest, and with an earnest look ahead at the life in store for me. Scarcely the old life, for I had saved money enough to begin business for myself in a little way. There was even a chance of partnership with my builder at Keswick, if I chose to settle down in the North. He and I had become intimate over our mutual efforts to push forward the erection of the building; he was a practical, honest North-countryman, who had saved a little money, but whose health was not good, and to whom an active partner would be of inestimable service. He had hinted to me several times that my perseverance under difficulties had amazed him and won his respect. With a partner like me, he could see his way to a very decent competence in the North. He was an old bachelor of forty-five, who wanted a partner and friend.

Still, Mr. Sanderson and I had not sat down together to talk seriously over the matter; I shunned the subject, and fancied that in London I could work my way better and more profitably; that in the turmoil going on there, I should find it so much easier to forget. After a while I assured myself that the country would become distasteful to me—that the new house completed, the kind mistress said good-bye to, it would be a madness that would prey upon me to remain in Cumberland. Only forgetfulness for me in the busy haunts of men, where the fight goes on eternally for fame and money, and there are a hundred rivals to struggle with you for each step you

make. In the *mêlée* I should be better off; in the quiet mountain villages all that I had ever dreamed of would ever be face to face with me.

Possessed with this thought, I found myself in the great hall of Nettlewood House, waiting to be ushered into Mrs. Zitman's presence. The pock-marked man, to whom I had taken an objection, and who appeared continually watching me from the corners of his bead-like eyes, preceded me along the corridors, and smiled sardonically when he announced me.

Mrs. Zitman was sitting alone in the library, a room into which I had not been shown before. A large and handsome room, impressed with rather more than the usual amount of gloom, owing to the dark bindings of the books, and the wall of rock that stood between the library windows and the light—the rock that rose rugged and fierce for a thousand feet above the mansion, and seemed hanging over it like a perpetual menace. Through the window nearest the lake, a gleam of sunshine stole fitfully into the room, and fell athwart the library table, and the fair head bending over it, marking with a broad band of light the scroll-work pattern of the carpet. A room more full of shadow, I had never entered.

"It is like a grave," she said, with a little shudder, as though my thoughts on entering had suggested themselves immediately to her; "cold and chilly with the dead hopes that lie buried here. It is always a struggle with me to enter—a release to close the door behind me. You see I have managed to confiscate the one intrusive gleam of sunshine that has found courage to steal in."

"It is a dark room," I said; "but there is a very natural reason for it."

"Oh! I have not been thinking of an unnatural reason," she said, hastily; "save that there must be one, for Herbert's constituting this his favourite retreat, I fancy. But then, he is a studious man."

She looked at the myriad of papers with which the library table was heaped, and said—

"Will you take a seat, Mr. Gear? I have got into a whirl of figures here, and the business fit will not evaporate until you talk to me of the new home."

I took a seat, and watched her very intently; sitting there in the sunlight, the one figure which had shed its brightness on the prosaicism of my life. She was looking fairer, better, and more beautiful. What an earnest face it was!—what cruelty of the dead or the living—which?—to have kept it so long shadowed by thoughts that should have been ever foreign to it! Young, rich, and unfettered, her life should have been far different to this—the world before her something for the less fortunate to envy.

Her pen dropped, the papers were tossed restlessly away.

"Tell me about the house Mr. Gear—I dismiss money matters *sine die*."

She clasped her hands in the lap of her grey silk dress, and leaned forwards with a new earnestness.

"The house is finished, Mrs. Zitman,"

"I am so glad!—I am so happy!" she cried.

"And my task is finished with it. With your permission, Mrs. Zitman, I purpose to depart next Tuesday."

"Next Tuesday, sir!" she murmured; "that is an early warning."

"I should be robbing you if I were to remain longer, Mrs. Zitman. The building is finished; it is already in the hands of your upholsterers and decorators. There will be three or four rooms soon completed, though I cannot advise you for your health's sake, to take possession of them. If I might beg one favour of you before I go, Mrs. Zitman, it is, that you will delay your removal till the spring."

She did not appear to have heard me. She looked up from her study of the carpet, and said without any attention to my last remarks—

"It is natural that you should be glad to escape. Nettlewood is a place which does not conjure up many pleasant associations at the best of times—you have seen it at its worst."

"I have spent my happiest days here," I exclaimed; "I could live here all my life!"

This outburst of fervour was beyond my power to repress—was in direct opposition to the ideas with which I had sought to influence my will. It was an unnatural effort, and so escaped in that hour to flush her cheek, and make her tremble with my rash vehemence.

"Happy days here!" she exclaimed, catching at once my fervour; "what is there in this place to make me believe in such a wish as that?"

I was on my guard now.

"I do not know, madam."

"It is an indirect compliment to me?" she cried, scornfully; "an effort to imply that this house, and those within it, have tended to these happy days? It is a courtesy that sits ill upon you, and its very falsity shames you with its mock avowal. Don't tell me of happiness in Nettlewood!"

The barriers around me were broken down again by that charge. The shield of cold reserve was shattered from the love it sought to screen.

"Pardon me, but it has been a happiness which I dare not think of now, or in the future days when I am apart from here."

She looked towards me timidly; she had flushed a deeper crimson, and her hands were trembling more and more.

"I do not understand you," she said, in a faint whisper.

"I have not a right to seek to make you comprehend," I said; "to speak of my happiness will not enhance your own."

"I know no happiness," was the quick reply.

"You have all that can conduce to it, and it may come at any moment. It is in your own hands."

"All that can conduce to happiness!" she exclaimed—she started to her feet at this—Mr. Gear, I have nothing! When you are in London, if you have time to think of me, remember me as the lonely woman growing old before her time, crushed down by the thoughts that can never grow more light, dispirited by want of sympathy, or the companionship of one true friend. All that can conduce to happiness!" she repeated once more in a tone still more scornful, from the depths of its intensity, "that is the money which my husband left me! Oh! sir, I would pay it all away to-morrow for my ransom—I would prefer to be poor and struggling for my bread to escape the cruel thoughts that keep me weak—to emerge from the iciness of the world I am made to move in, to break the promises to which I have been bound, and feel myself free to act, and think, and speak. The riches that your selfish nature looks at as my felicity are the chains that drag me to despair."

"No, no—don't say that! Mrs. Zitman, you will say no more!" I cried.

I had sprung to my feet, and was facing her. We had both been under the spell of a strange emotion, that carried us apart from common life—my last movement warned her of her danger. She sat down, passed her trembling hand across her face, and then looked at me with a faint, forced smile.

"It is better not," she murmured, "I am a childish woman—you will excuse me."

She had changed; she was the patroness again, and I the poor dependant. Silently I drew back across the threshold of the romance which had nearly betrayed me to her feet."

"Pardon me too, Mrs. Zitman," I stammered, "I am strangely excited this morning—I am nearly forgetting my business habits. You will allow me to withdraw now?"

"Certainly."

"You will allow me even to take my farewell of you, madam. I have important business in London, and it is possible that I may leave at once.

"At once!"

She turned to the table, and looked for a while amongst the papers with which it was strewn—finding nothing to reward her search.

"Do you mean," she said at last, without turning her head towards me, "that it is possible you may leave here before Tuesday?"

"Very possible indeed."

"And the business——"

"Can be transacted by letter—little remains to explain or settle."

"Very well," was the almost cold answer.

I hesitated still; I did not like to go away—to part with her, and to feel that in a few moments I should vanish away from her for ever. But I had betrayed myself—my love—I was sure of that—and I had seen the fear of my avowal blanch her face as the secret hovered on my lips. Suddenly I went towards her, and held forth my hand.

“Mrs. Zitman—I will say good-bye now.”

She turned and looked at me almost sadly. She rose from her chair again as she placed her little hand in mine.

“God bring you happiness in His good time, madam—good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” she answered softly.

I resigned her hand, stifling the impulse to raise it to my lips, and went away out of the room, along the corridor, into the hall, and thence into the vale, meeting no one in my progress.

I walked about the Vale all day, restless and disturbed, planning a hundred methods of departure, and of change of life at home, and forgetting them all in thoughts of Mary Zitman before they reached maturity. The interview had been a strange one, and had affected her strangely, every word I could remember, and every word had a mysterious attraction yet, and made my heart thrill and sink again. I would go away to-morrow—for ever after to-morrow let the curtain fall upon this giant folly which had grown too powerful for my strength!

But the morrow came, and I lingered still; my resolution was not strong enough to tear myself away, although I saw no more of her, heard no more from her. I had alarmed her by the evidence of my presumptive thoughts, and she had shrunk back to her own self, amazed at my audacity. And yet—no, no, I would think no more of her; the next day I would really go away for ever!

And the next day came; my portmanteau was packed, I was firm in my resolve then, stern and inflexible as the fate setting me apart from her. I would go over the building again before I went to London, however. I would proceed to the old spot where the simple gothic mansion made a feature now in the green vale of Nettlewood. Wandering amidst the empty rooms, still so bare, and desolate, and damp, the thought struck me that she had not promised to keep aloof from them till the spring, and that I had not pressed upon her sufficiently the danger to which she, a delicate woman, exposed herself by entering her new house too quickly. She was an impetuous woman; it had been her one wish to leave the gloomy mansion she inhabited before the Christmas came—she would exchange her residence at once, and endanger her health, I felt assured. And this should not be!—at the risk of offending her by seeing her again, and standing in the way of her intentions, I resolved to warn her, though all the renewed pain of parting with her was to add to my share of bitter memories.

Bitter memories! And as I went along the carriage drive of Nettlewood House, my heart plunged again with gladness at the chance of one more glimpse of her face before I went away!

Mrs. Zitman was at home, as it was natural to expect. Mrs. Zitman was in the old library again, into which, after a while, the pocket-marked laquay ushered me. In the library, at the same post, with the same gleam of sunshine falling upon her; it seemed as though my interview had never been abruptly broken off, and I had never said good-bye to her.

"You have not yet left us, then, Mr. Gear," she said, a little coldly, as I advanced.

"Not yet." was my hoarse answer.

"Will you be seated? I will not detain you a moment. I am finishing a letter to my brother."

I sat down a little way apart from her, whilst she turned to the library table, and hurried off the letter which I had interrupted. I did not like this new coldness of demeanour, although I had brought it on myself, I was aware. She was on her guard now—she distrusted me!

"Now, sir."

She turned, and looked steadily at me for a while, then the long-fringed lids veiled the eyes that could not stand against my sorrowful gaze towards her.

"Mrs. Zitman, before I go away to-day I have ventured to intrude again to ask one question."

"What is that?" she said, in a low tone, a tone strangely low and vibratory.

"I wish to ask if it be really your intention to take possession of this new house at once?"

"Directly there is a habitable room therein."

"But you have not fully made up your mind?"

"I have," was the firm answer.

"Then I must forbid it," I answered as firmly as herself, "there would be great danger—the damp will linger there for weeks yet; your health is delicate."

"Is this the object of your coming here this morning?"

"It is."

"You promised me that the house should be finished—even habitable—on Christmas day."

"I did my best, but I do not think——"

"I will chance it, sir."

"Mrs. Zitman, you shall not!"

She started at my imperious assertion; her colour changed; the blush that rendered her so beautiful mounted to her cheeks again.

"What difference can this make to you?"

"The difference between my happiness and unhappiness; the

satisfaction of believing when I am apart from here that you are well, or the misery of thinking that I have been the means of injuring you."

"It is kind of you to think of this," she murmured, "and I will thank you for it."

"And will promise me?" I urged.

"Well, I have made no one *happy* in my life yet—I promise."

"Madam, I will think less of the satire than your consent," I responded.

She saw that she had pained me, and she changed colour again. She was ever anxious that I should not go away stung by any word of hers.

"Forgive me, but you spoke of happiness in a strange manner, as if any promise of mine could make you, a man of the world, happy!"

"*As if!*" I echoed.

She shrank in the chair at my reply, and then glanced timidly towards me.

"A man of the world, too," I re-echoed; "that is a hard title to bestow upon me."

"Why?"

"I have heard you speak of worldly men with such contemptuous scorn."

"All men are worldly, are they not?"

"In one sense, possibly, but not in the sense which you have more than once conveyed to me. You called my nature selfish in our last interview. Was it just?"

"You treasure my words, Mr. Gear."

"Yes."

"And it *was* a worldly man setting store by the world's wealth, who could assert that I was in the possession of all that could conduce to happiness."

"I was not thinking of your money, or that that alone could bring you peace."

"I am a woman without a fair hope in the world," she said; "had I been poor, I should have known many friends; with an interdict upon seeking one honest friendship, I have been shut away from all that makes the heart light. Mr. Gear," turning to me with her proud face full of an indignant protest against man's sordidness, and her own hard fate, "you will leave here a wiser man—you will tell those who think of gold as the one god to bow the knee to, that there are a few mad people to whom its possession is a curse."

"Will you say more?"

"What more is there left me to say?"

"Tell me again, as in our last meeting, that you would prefer to be poor, to escape the cruel thoughts which keep you weak, to break the chains which drag you to despair—you said despair!" I cried.

"I do not retract the word."

I had risen and was leaning over her; she trembled very much now, she bent her head away from me more and more.

"Then ask me to stay, and be the one friend in whom you may ever trust—tell me that you will—that you will submit your fate to my hands, leaving to me—a poor man, whose chances of success in life are not apparent yet—to bring that happiness to you from which wealth has shut you out. Madam, I hate those riches too, with all my soul—without them I should have uttered long ago that which I dare, in the face of your avowal, to confess here at your feet. I love you!"

I flung myself before her, and caught at her white, trembling hands; she was looking down at me with a face of alarm, and yet with a face that did not daunt me, now the floodgates of my heart were loosed. At her feet, and clasping still the hands which, after the first struggle, were left within my own, I told my story—rambling incoherent, and marred by my rapidity of utterance, but comprehensible, and, after a while, welcome to her.

"Mrs. Zitman—Mary—you will answer me. You will tell me that I have not been too bold in loving you?"

"You—you love me!" she whispered; "is it possible that you are willing to burden yourself with a poor, nervous woman, and see the golden vision fade away for ever from us both. You, Canute Gear, have the courage to attempt MY RANSOM, and create anew a world for me?"

"It will be happiness, Mary. Will you venture with me?"

She bent down over me and cried a little. I pressed her to my throbbing breast, and her own white hands clasped my neck, and did not thrust away my face from hers.

"Will I venture with you?—will I believe in this love which I have seen and feared and hoped for?—with all my heart, how willingly?" she sobbed.

* * * * *

"Ech! Guid save us, but this is a scene for a pictur that'd astonish yeer brither," exclaimed Long Janet, entering the room, and staring at us standing side by side in the sunshine, which had fallen on us both!

"Dear old faithful friend," said Mrs. Zitman, leaving me to approach her with both hands extended, "I have broken my promise to Herbert—the cruel promise extorted from me before he went away—but you, at least, will wish me joy."

"Nane sooner, or wi' mair heart in the wish," said Janet, seizing the white hands in her own rough red ones, and shaking them vigorously up and down, "hae na' I seen it cooming on this lang while—did na' it seem as if I war boond to struggle for it in my ain wa', kenning what war best for ye?"

"Did you know that, that Mr. Canute was thinking of me, just a little?"

"Deed, and I kenned it a'. And 'deed, didna' it strike me that he war the mon to make ye happy—clever and braw-lookin', and a bauld mon, too, to keep yer ain seelie narves frae gie'in' wa'."

"Thank you, Janet."

"Lord be gude to us! didna' I do my best to bring ye twa thegither, kenning what the lassie would be after ye'd gane awa' wi' the leetle brak o' better times ye'd brought wi' ye. War I blind eno' not to see it a-growing upo' her?"

"Did I betray the love that was taking root in my heart?" said Mary. "And oh! Canute," turning to me, "have I betrayed it too soon or too boldly—asked you to have pity on me and not leave me in desolate grandeur here? What did I say?" she said, with a pretty bewilderment, that made me long to clasp her to my heart again; "pray tell me all that I said in my excitement?"

"Some day, when that desolate grandeur has faded away like a dream."

"And left me, Canute, oh! so poor!"

"No—but, oh! so rich!"

"And—and Herbert? My brother, who is to go down the hill with me, who did not leave me in October last until I had promised him to remain rich and single for his sake. I am very selfish not to think of him a little more," she said.

Janet broke in here.

"He's a stout bairn. If ye can bear the change, he can wi' his ain money, and wi' that clear luke ahead that dinna lose sight o' the bast chance. And if he canna bear it, I dinna see that ye are boond to sink yer happiness for the sak o' his ain. That's the licht I put it in."

"The best light, Janet, and the truest," I replied.

"This ha' been an unlooky hoose—we are well *shut* o' it," said Janet, we ha' had lots o' servants, and they're na troostworthy or hanest, I caught the pock-marked loon leestin' at the stooody door here."

Mary Zitman turned to me with a little of her old nervousness apparent, but she met my bright smile and returned it.

"We need not fear how soon the news spreads," I said; "we need not let the days lengthen very much before we seek for happiness side by side, Mary."

"And the new house, Canute?"

We three broke into a merry laugh together, as the same idea seized us simultaneously. How the shadows which had haunted that room so long must have huddled closer together that day, at this unusual demonstration.

"We must leave that to good Mrs. Ray!" I answered.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SECOND LETTER FROM ELLEN.

"*Immediate.*

"December 16th, 18—.

"MY DEAR, PATIENT CANUTE,—Ever the most patient and the most kind; seeking no opportunity to pierce the mystery in which I had enshrouded myself, but waiting for my own signal to raise the curtain between us and the one secret that I have ever had from you.

"Well, the time has come, dear, and the truth comes with it. I was married last October. It had been a long and fitful engagement, depending upon the will of others so much for its sequence in a happy marriage, that I have preferred, and have been advised to vex no one with my love troubles, or my happy but secret marriage which ended them until this time. How the courtship began, and who began it, I will tell you when we meet—it is too long a story for the limits of a *hurrygraph* like this. I write in haste to ask you to obtain leave of absence at once—come to London, and talk with me and my husband about the dear mother whom it will be so hard to leave. Come at once, I beg of you. There is a surprise awaiting you here.

"Ever your affectionate sister,

"NELLIE GEAR."



CHAPTER IX.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE.

THERE was much to perplex me in Ellen's letter—it implied good news—it spoke of much happiness having fallen to her share, and yet as if despite the writer's intention, there was a mournful cadence in it which rang out and set me thinking deeply of the happy marriage to which she had alluded. Was it only the natural confusion of confessing to the great change, or sorrow at parting with the mother, or doubt of the future which she might have rashly chosen for herself.

Naturally impatient of control, regretful at her own hard fate, the weary round of teaching day after day in a family singularly devoid

of gentleness and courtesy, had she, with her characteristic impulse accepted the first offer which she thought might raise her from the dead level of her monotonous existence? Had she already grown wordy, and thought but of bettering herself, as the phrase runs, or was it a love-match after all?

Mary Zitman and I took counsel together over that letter. My troubles, my confidences, were hers now—ours was a love without an alloy to it—it was at least utterly devoid of selfishness.

"You must go at once, Canute," she said, sadly.

"We were only talking of my departure yesterday, Mary," I said; "it is but a day or two before the time."

"A day or two stolen from the first real happiness I have known, are of value to me, Canute."

"Consider it a day or two nearer to the happiness of possessing one home together, dearest," I replied.

She blushed at this, and her hands involuntarily pressed the arm on which they were clasped. We were wandering in the lanes together that morning; the fine weather still continued—spring seemed to have come before its time in the green valley—the birds were singing once more—Nettlewood to our romantic fancies, had become Arcadia.

In the council together on our special love affairs, we had resolved to marry at once; I had pressed the question, and it had been a woman's natural reserve rather than her wish that demurred to it. Our positions were too distinct and separate, whilst she remained the heiress and I the dependant—there were so many things to stand between us and our marriage, if we lingered on the threshold of our fair estate. Mary Zitman feared the barriers in her way, and in her heart was anxious to surmount them, and feel my strong arm at her side protecting her. She avowed it at last; she feared her brother's return—feared even the firmness of my own resolves that could choose her for herself alone.

"I have never known independence, Mary, and shall not miss all that riches can procure me. But you who have been accustomed to every luxury in life, what will you say and think of the poor home I can only offer you?"

"I will say it is home, blest by all the home-angels that will hover round us, dear."

"Well, then, I will try and find Doctor's Commons, Mary, and bring back the wedding license."

"Or never come back to me again, but leave me to die of despair in Nettlewood Vale!"

"Is that likely?"

So it was arranged that I should depart that very evening on my journey. Mrs. Zitman was anxious to place her carriage, or at least a saddle-horse at my disposal; but I was reluctant to accept the favour even from her. I had scarcely a right to avail myself of the resources of her establishment, or to parade to the small world of

Nettlewood our intimate relationship. I engaged from Henlock one of those bumping, springless machines which rattle their way over every mountain road, and seldom come to grief under the process. This car I arranged to meet me on the other side of the Ferry at six in the evening—its driver calculating that by ten or eleven at night we should work our way to Borrowdale and Keswick. From Keswick in the morning, it would be easy to push on to Ambleside and Bowness—I hoped to be in London late on the evening of the following day.

In London to see Ellen's husband, and bid God speed to him and her—to ascertain the reason for keeping me in the dark concerning the marriage—to buy the license for my own wedding—to consider what was best for my mother, whom Mary Zitman was very anxious to see—to find out Herbert Vaughan, if possible, and startle him, whom Mary was *not* anxious to see, by the determination his sister and I had arrived at—to visit Doctors' Commons also, at Mary's request and for her sake, not mine, to study carefully the last will and testament of Samuel Zitman, Esq., late of Nettlewood House.

A copy of the will was in Herbert Vaughan's possession, but the cabinet was locked, and Vaughan had ridden to London with the key.

I wished to bid adieu to my betrothed at that time, but she would come to Nettlewood Ferry at six, to say good-bye to me. She had no fear of what the Rays would think—she even had her suspicions that the Rays, by some unforeseen means, had already been startled by the tidings of their coming greatness.

She was right, as I ascertained immediately upon my arrival at the Ferry Inn that afternoon.

I found Mrs. Ray holding by a deal table on the grass plot, where the Nettlewood folk were accustomed to take their ease at their beer in the summer time. She was evidently waiting for me, stirred up by the news that had so quickly drifted to the Ferry Inn. Her face was paler than usual, the hooked nose more pointed, the greenish grey eyes more full of fire. She stood and clung to the table, and waited impatiently for my approach; in her excitement she had pushed her black cap to the back of her head, where it hung by a high comb like a weeper. The scanty grey hairs were all dishevelled by the wind, and streamed about her shoulders, and were pushed away every instant from her excited face. She had never seemed more wild and witch-like in the whole time of my acquaintance with her.

"Mr.—Mr. Gear," she gasped, as I pushed open the swing wicket, "come here, please. I—I want to speak to you."

"Well—what is it, Mrs. Ray?"

"Is it true that—that—that—that—"

She gulped and choked and fought with one yellow claw in the air before her utterance came back.

"That you are going to marry Mrs. Zitman?"

"Do they talk of this in Nettlewood?"

"Yes—everybody—every—body. For God's sake, say it's true, man!"

"Well, it's true."

The effect of my answer was greater than I had anticipated. She flung her hands aloft, and reeled away from the table, to be caught by her daughter Letty, who had been watching her from the entry.

"Let—Let—Letty dear," she cried, "it's gospel truth! He owns it! We shall wear silks and satins and gold chains, and keep our carriage, and brave it over all these wretches here, and they'll come to beggary at the great house, thank the Lord! It's what I've allus prayed for—what I've allus dreamed would come to you and me, the lawful heirs to my dead brother's mo—mo—money."

She broke into a passionate fit of weeping and croaking on Letty's shoulder; the face of the daughter, dark and ominous, looked over her at me.

"You do not share in your mother's rejoicing, Letty?" I said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I see no joy in the change that may be waiting for us. I change places with *her* on whom there has always been misery and affliction—I don't believe in the happiness her money will bring *me*!"

"You're a fool," sobbed the old woman, "you're the worst of all the fools I've—I've ever come across!"

"The money comes too late for me, mother," she answered; "I'd sink it at the Ferry, and not give one sigh for its loss."

"You're—you're a baggage—the worst of all the baggages about here. Let me go into the house out of sight of such a daughter."

She wrenched herself away, and tottered into the house. Following her, we found that she had taken possession of the best room.

"This is *my* room, Mr. Gear," she said, "the best of everything belongs to me now!"

"I shall not require it any longer, Mrs. Ray. I leave for London to-day."

"What's that for?" she exclaimed.

"For private reasons of my own."

"To buy the license—" she guessed shrewdly; "ay, that's striking with a will, and like a wise man. Don't forget there's Herbert Vaughan behind you yet to stop it—I know that he is your fate and mine—I said so when he came across the Ferry long ago."

She was suffering very much from nervous excitement. She sat close to the table, drumming her long crooked fingers on its oil-cloth covering, playing imaginary preludes to her coming greatness. A sudden idea stopped her fantasia for an instant.

"Mind there's no agreement atween us—you broke it off and insulted me, an old woman too! There's not a penny on the bargain you broke off with me!"

"Do not be afraid that I shall claim one penny, Mrs. Ray."

"See what a judge of human nature I've turned out!" she said conceitedly. "I read it like a book months and months ago."

"Shall we go now?" asked Letty from the doorway.

"My room!" replied this obstinate old woman; "the best of everything for Martha Ray. Shut up the Ferry Inn, and don't serve another customer. When I come into my property, I'll burn this place to light me on the road to home!"

"Patience, mother—we are travelling too fast," said Letty sternly, "there is a crowd of accidents to thwart us yet. Mr. Gear is going to London, and may die, or repent, by the way."

"You—you hussy, what made you put that awful thought in my head?" she shrieked.

The thought calmed her somewhat—the chances against the prize appeared to present themselves with more distinctness. She left off her horrible tattoo, and looked piteously across the table at me.

"You'll take care of yourself, young man. It's a long journey, and them railway engines are allus a-busting and smashing."

I could not refrain from a hearty laugh at this change of tone, and she laughed with me, as though "busting and smashing" were rather a pleasant joke than otherwise. She improved in demeanour, too, wonderfully, and rose to leave me in possession of the best room again.

"It's at your service, sir," she said, "I'm only a little beside myself with the good news. You don't mind the old woman who's been allus like a mother to you."

"Oh! pray don't mention it."

She and her daughter retired—presently to return just as I was offering up my thanks to find myself alone. The old lady was struggling to wrench one arm away from the restraint of her daughter's hand, whilst with the other she clutched to her side a wine bottle covered with sawdust and cobwebs.

"Let me go, Letty—there ain't a thing I do that pleases you. If you ain't more dutiful by-and-bye, I'll make a will that 'll leave you short enough, see if I don't."

She struggled into the room, placed the bottle on the table, produced from the pocket of her apron three wine glasses.

"I said long ago that when the good news came, I'd drink the last bottle but one of the port my husband laid down thirty years ago. The last bottle of all's for the wedding-day of Mary Zitman. I—I don't mind extravagance when there's money that won't be missed a-coming, and so we'll drink your health and a safe journey to you, sir."

This was at least a kind offer of Mrs. Ray's, and I saw no loop-hole to escape from it.

"Tain't bad wine for thirty years a'most," she muttered; "when the doctor ordered it for me the winter afore last, I asked him if he'd

pay for it as well, for I couldn't. Lord, didn't his fat pig's face turn red at that?"

She sat down to laugh over that little joke of hers, rummaging meanwhile for a corkscrew in her apron's pocket.

"Here, Letty, draw the cork, girl, and look a little less sour over our good luck, or you'll turn the blessed liquor. Now, Mr. Gear, *that's* your glass!"

She sat down and waited for the drawing of the cork—an operation performed very rapidly by Letty. The wine was poured forth, and Mrs. Ray raised her glass in the air.

"To Mr. and Mrs. Gear—God send their happy marriage soon!"

"God bless them both!" echoed Letty, seizing the glass suddenly; "they deserve happiness—they have a poor girl's wishes for it."

She drank the wine, and left the room at once. Mrs. Ray stared after her.

"That girl's a-going silly fast. That'll be an uncommon pleasant thing to happen when I get rich. Well," turning to me, "what have you got to say?"

"To thank you for your good wishes—to wish in return," raising my glass, "that you and your daughter may be happy together in the new life that is coming."

"Hum," she said, considering the toast, "I don't exactly see how that's to be. But thank ye, and—and fill your glass again. I'm in a rare liberal humour to-day, I tell you."

I expressed the shortness of time that lay before me prior to my departure as an excuse for further wine-drinking, and abandoned the parlour to Mrs. Ray. In my own room I packed up the few things which I thought might be requisite for my short stay in town, and found that there was only a quarter of an hour left me to remain in Nettlewood.

It was a dark but starlit night. From my chamber window I could see the shimmer of the stars in the deep black water of the lake. I hurried down stairs, and met Letty at the foot thereof.

"Has Mrs. Zitman arrived?"

"Not yet. Come into the back room here—and leave the best room to my mother. She will not stir, she says."

I followed her into the back room; by the light on the table, over which she bent to trim the guttering candle, I could see that her eyes were red with weeping.

"Well, Letty," I said, "these sudden changes affect us all in different ways, but I had hoped to see you happier."

"Thank you," she added, with a faint smile.

"I prophesied a brighter time would come for you—I believe it will now, more than ever."

"All is very dark beyond," she muttered; "I don't see whence

the brightness is to follow. I heard news to-day which, forestalling yours, quenched every ray of light for me!"

Jabez entered at this moment.

"The Ferry boat's ready, Measter Gear. And here's the lady from the House and her sarvant, and"—looking back over his shoulder—"Measter Mad Wenford, or I'm dreaming!"



CHAPTER X.

DEPARTURE.

THEY came into the back room of the Ferry Inn—Mrs. Zitman and Mr. Wenford in advance, the gaunt serving-woman bringing up the rear. Very strangely, very moodily, did Wenford look towards me, not taking the trouble to exchange one word of greeting.

Mrs. Zitman sprang to meet me, regardless of appearances. Before the eyes of Nettlewood society what had she to study?

"I am full of evil forebodings again, Canute. I have come to ask you not to go away from me."

"I think there are many reasons for our parting, Mary—we must not let a few fancies hinder it for this once."

She gave way to me.

"If it must be, then," she added, with a sigh.

Wenford crossed the room towards the mantel-piece, against which he leaned his tall form, and watched our meeting. The skirt of the long cloak he wore trailed in the peat ashes of the fire grate. Janet dropped into a chair by the door, and sat there in a very rigid fashion.

"Mr. Wenford crosses the Ferry to-night, Canute—like yourself, he tells me he has urgent business in London."

"He is aware of our engagement?" I asked.

"Yes—he has been speaking of it. Will you think me deceitful when I tell you for the first time that he has been a suitor for my hand?"

"I have heard it from his own lips," I answered.

"I believe after his own wild fashion," she whispered, "that he loved me, and that for a time he felt it hard that I could not teach myself to love him in return. He has been inclined to revive the

subject to-night, and upbraid me for the choice I have made. If he be churlish in his manner towards you, you will make allowance for the cause, dear Canute."

"Surely."

"I think that I have fought my battle of words with him pretty well. He is quite tame to-night."

The clock on the landing-place struck six. Jabez, who had withdrawn upon the arrival of visitors, made his re-appearance.

"I can see the car on the other side of the Ferry, Mr. Gear," said he.

"See to my horse, fellow," growled Wenford; "it crosses with me. I have a long journey to perform."

"All right, sir—it is in the ferry-boat."

"Oh! Canute, do not forget me in the little while you'll be away," Mary Zitman cried, clasping my hands in hers; "remember the lonely home, and my worse loneliness until you come back to cheer my heart and lighten it. Yours is a valuable life, dear; be careful of it for my sake. If I lose you, I must die!" she cried.

"Is it likely that I shall forget you, dearest? Is it not more likely that your brother may return here, and in the days before him find time to prejudice you against me, and plead his own case with you."

"I will have no pleading that shuts the door against my future. He has known happiness—I have been ever apart from it."

"Well, it is only warning for warning, Mary. Shall we say good-bye now?"

She raised her face to mine with a child's confidence and love, regardless of the watchers round us. As I kissed her trembling lips, I saw the tears brimming her eyelids at the thought of parting with me. Wenford's heavy foot startled both of us.

"When you are ready, Mr. Gear. The ferry-boat awaits your pleasure."

"I am ready, sir."

I recoiled at the darkling frown in Wenford's face—I remembered on the instant all that he had warned me of. Mrs. Zitman, who had been steadily surveying him, caught at my arm with her clasped hands, and then, the moment afterwards, as though swayed by a new impulse, left me to place her hands in his.

"Good-bye, Mr. Wenford. A fair journey to you—a safe one."

He bowed his head very gravely and stolidly, but made no reply.

"You, Edmund Wenford, who know so much of my early life, can bear me out that it has been a troubled one—that to me there has scarcely fallen one ray of sunlight on my path. We have been friends, sir; will you act the friend once more by journeying with him as *your* friend, siding with him against the evil that may meet him by the way?"

He shrank at this adjuration, and seemed to make an effort to

draw his hands from hers. He turned away his face from the full light of her searching eyes.

"I ask you, Mr. Wenford, in good faith—I who am left still to believe that the noble heart of your youth has not been wholly scorched up by passion and hate."

"You believe that still?" he said, scornfully, as she let go his hands.

"Yes."

"You ask me to be that man's friend—you!"

"I remain yours, despite all, in the face of all."

"Well—well!"

He strode impatiently out of the room—presently we heard his whip cracking in the night air.

"If he ride with you, Canute, be on your guard," she said, excitedly; "he never looked more mad than now."

"I do not fear him."

We went out of the room and down the dark passage together—I drew her to my side again, as one with whom it was a trial to part. The door of the best room was open, and Mrs. Ray sat before the fire fast asleep. Her head had sunk forwards on her chest, and one hand still retained the empty wine-glass. The bottle of port wine lay on its side on the oilskin cover, *empty!* In the flush of her good-fortune Mrs. Ray had taken to drinking!

"Don't disturb her," whispered Letty, "if you can go away without her seeing either of you, it will be the better course."

"Good-bye, Letty."

"Good-bye, sir."

After I had shaken hands with her, Letty still continued to accompany us down the sloping road-way to the water's edge. Jabez and his companion were waiting near the ferry-boat. Mr. Wenford stood in the boat itself, his hand upon the bridle-rein of his horse.

"Write to me every day—twice a day," whispered Mary. "I shall be very anxious till I hear from you again."

"Trust me."

"With my life!"

I pressed her to my side again—we had parted, when a cry from Mrs. Ray arrested our progress. That estimable lady was advancing in frog-like fashion towards us in the darkness.

"Letty, Letty!—has he gone?"

"Silence!" said Letty, fiercely.

"But has he gone!—oh! but has he gone away?"

She passed her daughter, and ran fairly into my arms. By standing my ground well, I avoided a backward tilt into the lake.

"Oh! here you are!—and do'ee take care of yourself, and put something round your throat, or this night air'll grip it—and mind they don't spill you on the mountain roads—and oh! good Lud! take care of yourself in those horrid railway trains! You'll let me

know how you are getting on—my own son, who's been such a comfort to me in all these winter months! What's that wretch Jabez dancing the lantern about for?"

"I'm not a-moving the lantern!" cried the aggrieved Jabez.

"You're a-dancing with it, you know you are—and so's George—look at him! And there's a man with a dancing horse in the ferry-boat, or something's wrong with my poor head to-night."

"Samethin's wrang!" commented Janet.

"Oh! are you there, you half Scotch and half Cumberland Jezebel?" she cried, leaving me to approach her, but intercepted by Letty, who drew her arm within her own; "don't you know your betters when you see 'em"

"Alwa'."

"Then be 'spectful. Letty, who's that in the boat?"

"Mr. Wenford."

"Going where?"

"To London, I believe."

"With Gear! Oh! my head, my head;—let me think a little about that. Steady, Letty, and don't lean sideways so—going away with Mr. Gear! That means—that means——"

She gave a wild scream that curdled the blood of her auditors.

"*That means murder!* Don't go with him!—you don't know that man like I do—what he would do if Herbert Vaughan set him on to do it! Come back!—come back!"

"You hag!" shouted Wenford from the boat.

"Mrs. Zitman—lady, dear—ask him not to go."

"Mary, good-bye. All this is very childish, and this woman is very drunk. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. God bless you!"

We parted in earnest—I stepped on board the Ferry-boat, and Jabez and his man sprang after me, and pushed it away from land. Mrs. Ray continued to shriek after us, till the dark figures on the water's grew more indistinct, finally mingled with the darkness of the night, and were lost to my yearning gaze.

The oars plashed in the water—the tall figure by the horse's head stood erect and motionless, looking back also. Presently he leaned forwards, dropped something into the lake, and then resumed his original position, which he maintained till the Black Gap side was reached.

The mountain car was waiting for me—the man extinguished the lantern which had been the signal of his arrival to the people at the Ferry. I crossed from the boat to the path, and took my seat by the side of the driver.

Mr. Wenford did not move. Jabez fidgeted with the oars, and looked at him. George asked if he should lead the horse out.

"No," he responded, moodily. "Turn back again."

"Back again, sir?"

"Is that order so very difficult to understand, you gaping idiot?"

"Pull back, Jabez."

"Good night, Mr. Wenford," I ventured to say.

I scarcely anticipated an answer. There was a long silence, which he broke at last.

"Good night. When you say your prayers to-night—if you be a pious man—thank God that she turned me from my purpose. The devil and I crossed the Ferry together to-night, Gear."

The boat was pushed away from the landing-place again, and the man in the car applied the whip to his horse. In a few minutes the distance was great between us—a black spot dotted the surface of the lake; the mountains loomed across the water at me, the shadow of the second range of giant hills darkened the path on which we rattled along to Keswick.

The first act of my life had ended.

BOOK IV.

RANSOM-MONEY.

"The die is cast, and cast for life."

COTTON.

CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

I ARRIVED at Euston Square late on the evening of the 19th of December.

The London city appeared more full of life and action; there were more faces in the street that night, more noise of cabs and omnibuses, more flare of gas in London highways. The whirl of life rendered me dizzy—surely Nettlewood was away in a foreign land, and nothing so lonely and weird-like could have existence in a country of which this vortex was the capital? I scarcely seemed to know my way along, at first, or to possess the faculty of steering clear of people whom I met, or of staying the rattle-rattle of the train, which was still making my temples throb.

I walked home that night to the little shop in Kennington Road. Although eager to reach home, and late as was the hour, I preferred to walk. I had been cramped by twelve hours' sitting posture in the railway carriage, and it was requisite to stretch my long legs somewhat. Sleeping by intervals in the carriage, I had had strange dreams, which had more than once awakened me with a start and a shout—strange ominous dreams of people athirst for my life, and tracking me like sleuth-hounds; of danger to Mary Zitman in my absence. Mary, alone in her mountain home, with no one to protect her now, spirited away by mysterious hands, and all search for her nugatory on my part! The dull impression left by those disjointed dreams was saddening me and I was anxious to walk it and my headache off together. On the eve of meeting Ellen, let me present a fair front to society, and mar not the family rejoicing!

I thought of Ellen all the way home. The mystery concerning her perplexed me more, the closer I approached to its solution. In my heart I felt aggrieved that she had hidden from me the story of her love—that not till two months after her marriage had she thought fit to allow the secret to escape. I did not intend to show my sense of being slighted—the hour was too late, and she would be troubled enough, poor girl! I had only to wish her joy, and pray for a blessing on her future, as I would have her pray, in her turn, for a blessing on my own.

It was strange that I was advancing with a revelation also—that within a few months of each other, Ellen and I should both leave behind for ever the shores of single life.

I found the little shop closed for the night. I roused the echoes of the street by an eccentric *cessara! a*, peculiar to myself. Would

they remember my old knock, I wondered, and hasten forth to meet me? Would Ellen and her mysterious husband be awaiting my arrival there?

A neighbouring church clock struck twelve as the knocker left my hand—the door opened, and my dear grey-haired old mother clasped me in her arms, and began crying on my shoulder very bitterly.

“Courage, my mother—you and I haven’t much to cry about, I hope.”

“Come in, my lad—come in.”

I closed the door behind us, and led my mother to the back parlour, where the gas jet flickered. Ellen was not there, but seated in her place—how well I knew her favourite position by the chimney-piece!—was, to my surprise, my brother Joseph.

“Where’s Ellen?” I exclaimed.

“You haven’t got the letter—it never reached you!” said my mother.

“What letter?”

“Telling you that they have left London for good.”

“Left London!” I exclaimed? “whence the necessity for this haste—what does it all mean?”

“They have gone back to Nettlewood.”

“WHERE!” I shouted.

“To Nettlewood. Ellen has married Mrs. Zitman’s brother!”

“Don’t tell me any more just now. I fancy that I must be dreaming.”

I drew a chair before the fire, and sat down to stare at the blazing coals. My brother Joseph surveyed me out of the corners of his eyes, and said nothing—even motioned to his mother not to disturb me for awhile.

The fact was at last finally realized—how it had come about was another matter, which they would attempt to explain when I was prepared to hear it.

“Now, then.”

“Joseph has come on purpose to explain, dear,” said my mother; “his shrewd head has it all arranged in systematic order. I haven’t strength or method enough to make it clear to you.”

“I’ve been kept up out of my natural rest to make it plain—I’ve left Mrs. Gear all alone in Newton Street, Canute, and she’s going to pieces with fright by this time, and all for your sake.”

“Thank you, Joseph. Now go on, please.”

Before he began, I shook hands with him, and hoped that he was well. He gave me a sickly smile, and answered that he was pretty well, considering—the last few months perhaps he hadn’t been quite himself, he added. He did not look like himself; on the contrary, he was more pale and angular than usual, I thought, but I did not interrupt him to express my thoughts.

“We heard that Mr. Vaughan had married Ellen, after courting

her for a year or so, last week. Ellen told that to her mother. Mr. Vaughan called at Newton Street and told me. Mr. Vaughan was a friend of the family where Ellen has been teaching so long—that's all."

"That's all!" I exclaimed, indignantly; "that's not half of it, Joseph."

"Oh! dear—what more do you want to know?" he said, wearily.

"Something more than the dry facts of this inexplicable case. Why this courtship and marriage have been kept so long in the dark? Why I have known nothing till this hour concerning it? Brother, you're driving me mad!" I shouted.

Joseph jumped at my vehemence, and hurt his head against the mantelpiece—my mother began crying again, and wiping her eyes with her silk handkerchief.

"Ellen didn't say anything whilst there was a doubt of Mr. Vaughan's intentions," he commenced again, rubbing the side of his head meanwhile; "and when he married her at last, there were still grave reasons for keeping it in the dark."

"What were they?"

"Ellen and he knows. There were people somewhere set against his marriage, I believe, so the wedding didn't transpire till a week ago; and the reasons for that step were all to be explained when you arrived to-night; and then important business, Mr. Vaughan said, compelled him to take Ellen to Nettlewood—and away they went to the place you've come from."

"It's a meagre explanation—you know nothing more?"

"Nothing."

"You have seen our sister's husband," I said, "what do you think of him?"

"He's the sharpest man I ever met with," said he, beginning to shudder violently; "an excellent man, clever, and amiable, and—sharp. I should say a wonderful man of business. Ugh! how cold it is!"

"You're not well, Joseph," said my mother; "you haven't been well some time now?"

"Oh! I'm very well, but it's so dreadfully cold. What do *you* think of him, Canute?"

He put his hands on his knees, and leaned forward very eagerly for my answer.

"I have seen but little of him—I cannot judge him yet. He is a mystery to me."

"He is a mystery to him!" muttered my brother to himself; "you—you," looking at me steadfastly, "don't remember ever to have met him before you went to Nettlewood?"

"No."

"Nor any one like him?"

"No—why do you ask?"

"It struck me that I had—that's all," he said, rising, and taking

his great-coat from the back of the chair he had been sitting in. "I got your twenty pounds back all right enough, Canute; but, good God, sir, why did you send whole notes through the post, like a madman?"

"Did I?" said I, absently.

"They might have been lost—good night—I wonder what Mrs. Joseph Gear will say to this? Good night, mother."

"Good night, my boy."

He was shuffling out of the shop, when I went after him, leaving my mother in the parlour.

"I may as well relate to you a piece of news now, in case I am compelled to hurry back to Nettlewood in my turn," I said in a low tone, not intended for my mother's ears. "I am going to be married in three weeks."

"To some one with money, surely?"

"To Mrs. Zitman."

He gasped for breath, and leaned against the street-door he had opened. He took his hat off, and knocked the pen from behind his ear in passing his full-veined hand across his forehead. He glared at me as at a spirit that had come from shadow-land to trouble him.

"To whom?" he said at last.

"To Herbert Vaughan's sister—Mrs. Zitman."

He thrust his hat on again, stooped, picked up his pen, and replaced it.

"Good night," he said, with a half groan that escaped in spite of him; "I shall see you to-morrow, perhaps—I must go now."

With the same scared look at me, he stepped into the street, and took his way down it, more round-shouldered than ever. I had never seen him more surprised, and in all my life I had never known him so mysterious.

Closing the door, I went back to my mother's side. From that faithful loving heart I should learn more to throw a light on Ellen's marriage than from the son whose powers of description she valued at so high a rate. I sat down at her side, and took her hand in mine—an action that made her cry again.

"Now, mother, you and I can calmly talk this over by ourselves. You can tell me all that Ellen said and thought at parting with you—all that you think of this mysterious match."

"Oh! my dear Canute, I do not know what to think."

"Tell me the story, or the fragments of it, in your own manner, and leave to me an attempt at its solution."

"But Joseph has so clearly ——"

"Never mind Joseph just at present. Now, mother, I am all attention."

My mother began. I need not give at any length her story here—it was indeed fragmentary, pieced by a little fact, and much of

guess-work—the guess-work of a mother anxious for the welfare of her youngest child.

The story resolved itself to this—that Ellen had confessed one night to an engagement with Mr. Herbert Vaughan, to a marriage with him late in the month of October last. Whilst there had been uncertainty, whilst there had been only a hope of his love for her, the subject had been under ban and interdict; when Vaughan had married her for love, a deep, passionate love akin to infatuation, my mother thought it, she, at his request had still kept it a secret—it was for her husband's welfare that she did so—and had worked on as governess, and been still the daughter to her until last week.

"She loves this man, then?" I asked.

"Passionately, I think. Oh! Canute, dear, don't you believe that he is a man worthy to be loved?"

Had my face already told her that?—had all the doubts which had crowded upon me concerning him stamped themselves so indelibly on my countenance, that this simple-hearted mother could read it like a book?

"Mother, I have no right to judge him," was my reply; "I have seen but little of him."

"He appears very amiable, and—quiet. He is very fond of Ellen."

"The woman who has known him longest, a faithful servant of the household, tells me there is not a better man living. She should know him better than I."

"And his sister—does she seem attached to him?"

"I have but seen them together once or twice—I cannot say. Hoping for the best, mother, let us now speak of my marriage."

"Oh! my goodness!—your marriage, too!"

"That will be a happy one—to which I look forward as to the brightest era in my life."

I told my mother of the engagement between Mary Zitman and myself—sketched with all a lover's graphic power the picture of my betrothed, dilated on her beauty, gentleness, and child-like trust in me. Of her fortune, that vanished away when I took her for my wife, I spoke but cursorily; it was a fleeting vision, at which I mourned not, and which I treated lightly. That it affected Herbert Vaughan and Ellen, that it left him to work his own way in the world, perhaps—he, a clever and a practical man—was, at least, no wrong to him, his sister's fortune not being his inheritance, nor he having a claim to its possession. If she had died, it must have gone to the Rays in the same manner as it would now pass over to them—and that the life he left her to, and seemed so little to study, would have endured much longer the eternal solitude to which her husband's will had doomed it, I could not believe.

In the midst of my encomiums on my mistress, my mother broke in with:

"And the mother—what is to become of the poor mother, Canute?"

"Do you think I have forgotten her, my dear?"

"Ellen spoke, at parting with me, of the happy home in Cumberland and she should set about preparing for me at once—but I haven't faith in the poor girl's earnest promises, somehow."

"It is possible that I may settle in Cumberland too—I have an offer of partnership which I feel disposed to accept. At least, there is an opening in life there, and where I settle down, there must settle by my side the faithful mother and friend!"

She was a woman of an unselfish disposition—a woman who understood life after all. In the midst of her tears, and of her satisfaction that she was not forgotten in my plan for the future stretching out before me, she said:

"Not to live with you, and harass your young wife with my old-fashioned habits—that will not do—since the world began it never has done, my dear. But if you will find me a little cottage in Cumberland, within a stone's throw of your home, and will come and see me very often, and let your children come to me and learn to love me speedily, why, I—I—I shall be a very happy old woman!"

She broke down again, but it was only at the bright prospect which had dazzled her so much. And before I went to bed that night I promised that *that*, at least, should happen in the days so little distant from me.

"I daresay dear Joseph would like me to live with him," she said, wiping her eyes at last, "but I'm tired of business and London streets, and I shall only miss one of my children by going with you to Cumberland. When any of us want sound advice, we can come to London for it, after all!"

"Ye-es," I responded.

My mother's faith in her elder son's ability, and her tacit assumption of the inability of good advice to be procured from any other source, had not grown less since our separation. It was a mother's confidence in the son that was growing a rich man, and I did not satirize it. If it rendered her content, of what had I to complain?

A few moments afterwards, my mother drew the blind aside from the parlour window.

"It's very dark, and you can't see the willow well now, Canute. But it's astonishing how bravely it has got on during all the summer and autumn months of your absence."

"We will accept it as an augury of the brave days in store for Ellen, mother."

CHAPTER II.

JOSEPH'S SHREWD HEAD.

DURING my short stay in London, I set myself the task of studying the last will and testament of Samuel Zitman, Esq. It had been the wish of the widow, and it was necessary for her sake, if not for my own, that I should possess a knowledge of it. Samuel Zitman had come to London in search of better health, and had lost strength so rapidly after his arrival, that he made his will in a hurry, and died two days after his solicitor had steadied his hand whilst he affixed his signature.

A copy of the will was lodged at the usual office in Doctors' Commons, and I found no difficulty in procuring it. It seemed a mercenary task to be studying that will there, but my interest was in its details, not in the money, which no power of mine could save for my betrothed.

A strange will, betraying much of the selfishness and narrow-mindedness of him who had dictated it when the death-cloud that no riches could dissipate hung over the house of Zitman.

It bequeathed, under conditions, the whole fortune, chiefly derivable from a copper mine at the back of the Black Gap mountain, to his relict, Mary Zitman. It took away all that property, and left her penniless, if she married a second time—the moment the wedding-ring was on her finger, the wealth of the world faded away, like Cinderella's pomp and parade in the fairy tale we big children never forget. Not a farthing remained to her from the wealth which Samuel Zitman had accumulated during his life—all the possessions that he had had in his time, or that were purchased after with his money, went away to his sister, Martha Ray, and to her heirs, executors, or assigns.

This if Mary Zitman married—this if Mary Zitman ever left Nettlewood Vale—this if Mary Zitman died. Whilst she remained true to her first husband's memory, she was free to dispose or spend her money as she pleased—that which was possible to claim, and which could be proved was purchasable with money derived from the estate, must fade away to nothingness if she became a wife a second time.

There were fifty or a hundred bequests—amongst them an income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year to his well-beloved brother-in-law, Herbert Vaughan, for much kindness and consideration during his illness, and the freehold of the Ferry Inn, with the right of holding the ferry, to his dear sister Martha Ray.

I came to a codicil, duly signed and witnessed, that startled me a little. It was the last idea of poetical justice that Samuel Zitman's mind could suggest. I could see him propped up in his death-bed smiling grimly at his own conceit. It was dated on the following day.

"In the 'sad, yet possible' event of Mary Zitman's marriage, the freehold of the Ferry Inn, together with all rights held by Mrs. Ray, were to pass into the hands of Mary Zitman and her heirs, successors, and assigns. Thus Mrs. Ray and Mary Zitman were to change places in every respect—it would be in our power, if we wished it, to open the Ferry Inn and begin business on our own account.

I was still studying the will, when my brother Joseph appeared at my elbow.

"I thought I should discover you here, Canute," he said.

"Did you?" I answered drily.

"It's worth considering—it's worth studying before you plunge into genteel poverty, and find there's a wife to support as well as yourself."

"I am studying this at Mrs. Zitman's request. The money is of no consideration to me."

"That's an odd remark. Have you finished?"

"Yes."

"Let us come into the street, then. I want a little talk with you."

We went together into the street a short while afterwards—for the first time in my life I found myself walking arm-in-arm with Joseph Gear down Knight Ryder Street.

In that desolate thoroughfare, with the great and gloomy chambers of proctors frowning down upon us, Joseph spoke of Mr. Zitman's will, proved himself thoroughly acquainted with the details thereof.

"You have read this will?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"I had occasion for it—that's all," he said, with his customary reserve.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"Have you made up your mind to marry Mrs. Zitman?" he inquired. "Really, Canute, have you seriously considered the importance—the consequences of such a step?"

"I have."

"Then—then I think I see a way to counteract the full force of the blow aimed at Mrs. Zitman, for a step that her husband feared she would take. I've been thinking of nothing else since you told me last night of your intention."

The shrewd head was in its element, but the cunning and crafti-

ness expressed upon the face shook my confidence in brother Joseph's sense of honour.

"It's a good turn that deserves another—I'll speak of that other presently, and I don't think you're the man to say no to the bargain."

"What bargain can I possibly make with you Joseph?"

"Just listen a moment."

He looked over his shoulder to make sure that there were no listeners in the neighbourhood—had he been plotting against church and state he could not have taken more precaution. He led me into the middle of the road, and walked me up and down in the mud with his arm pressing mine close to his side.

"That will requires back all *that is possible to claim*, all possessions purchased during Mrs. Zitman's widowhood; but who is to prove the amount of money expended on property, the amount of money given away for charitable purposes, the amount of money drawn from Mrs. Zitman's banker's account. No one can claim money spent or money missing during Mrs. Zitman's widowhood—only that which is left as evidences in brick and mortar or land, excepted. Where the money goes is always difficult to prove—Mrs. Zitman might have been a very extravagant, or a very liberal woman! That will's like an Act of Parliament—there's a coach and four to be driven slap through it, Canute."

"That'll do—that'll do, Joseph," I cried; "there may be loopholes through which to escape with the dead man's money—the money which was his soul, and which he loved before his wife or her future happiness. But I should expect to be haunted by his ghost and hated by that wife of his, if I strove to gain one sovereign from that money not lawfully my own. His widow chooses between his wealth and me—do you think that I would sully the purity and unselfishness of her choice by turning robber? Great heavens! Joseph Gear, what prompted you to play so poor a part of tempter?"

Joseph coughed, but he held his ground. Though in my excitement I had flung away my arm from his, he kept by my side, and reasoned with me, as with a froward child, to whom the full force of his argument was not apparent yet. I believe he saw no particular harm in cheating the dead man of his wishes—it was an unjust will, and to be taken advantage of, if possible. It was a choice between independence and indigence, and it was false delicacy, an outrage against the simple precautions of life, if I neglected the one chance that lay open to me before I married Mary Zitman.

But I could not see the fairness of the act; in that fearful obstinacy with which at last he taunted me, I would not listen to any scheme that would endow my future life with more riches than I dreamed of. I thanked him for his interest in my welfare, but I could not think it a "good turn" that turned me from the straight path of common honesty and sought by a juggle to deceive. I could not and I would not think of it, and all the plans which Joseph's

shrewd head had built for me were rendered harmless by an old-fashioned idea of mine as to what was strictly honest.

"Then you are not to be convinced?" said my brother, when he had exhausted all argument upon the subject.

"No, Joseph. More," I added, "I am sorry that you are anxious to convince me."

"For your own good—the welfare of your own future," he cried; "I have no interest in the matter, Canute."

"My dear Joseph, let me thank you again for that interest, but let me advise you in my turn. Will you?"

"What advice of yours can I profit by?" he grumbled.

"Don't think too much of the value of money—that is as bad as disregarding it too much. It has struck me to-day, Joseph, that this money life of yours in Newton Street is cramping up your soul and narrowing your views of what is fair and open. You mean well, but there's a roundabout way towards it, which you practice, and following it too closely will not make you the better man."

"And you, Canute, are too much of a dreamer, and are full of dreamy ideas in consequence," he retorted; "you do unto your neighbour what he would never think of doing unto you at any price—you shut your eyes to your own advancement, your own rights, and prate of honesty and uprightness, whilst others pick your pockets. I call that man a simpleton who studies not his own advancement."

"Whether by a legitimate way, or by a method that may bring him to the bar of the Old Bailey—well," I said rather too warmly, "I call that man a robber, to be locked up away from society as speedily as possible. I would track such a man to the death!"

Joseph took his hat off, and passed his hand across his forehead once more. Something of last night's look appeared to spring into his face again.

"You've woke up since you were last in London," said he, feebly; "you overpower me with this new energy. I am not well, or I don't feel this morning strong enough to cope with it. I'll wish you a good day, Canute."

We shook hands and parted. But I had not quitted the street, when he came after me, and touched me on the arm.

"If you go away to Cumberland before I see you again, let me wish you joy on your coming marriage? If I could have possibly spared the time, I would have come to Cumberland to the wedding feast."

"Scarcely worth the trouble and expense, Joseph. It will be a very quiet marriage."

"I wouldn't have cared about the trouble and expense, for once. Out of brotherly friendship, and to show that we bear each other no enmity."

"Enmity!—is it likely?"

"I hope not. I hope it will never be so bad as that!"

He extended his hand again, and shook mine very warmly in his. He went away after that slowly and dejectedly. For many a long day after that parting between us, I was unable to comprehend this new manner of my elder brother. It was a trifle more mystery to add to the cloud-land which was destined to deepen round my path, and shut me in with it.



CHAPTER III.

MY SISTER'S HUSBAND.

I HAD made up my mind as to my future the next day. Mr. Sanderson's offer was a good one, and a certain means of living, at any rate—with a wife at my side, I could not afford to speculate in uncertainties. My knowledge of architecture and surveying would be of service to my partner; his connection in the country would assist me; together I had no doubt we should earn a fair income, and I, for one, need not mourn over the riches my wife possessed before she married me. That she would never regret the change herself I was very well assured.

The licence was procured at Doctor's Commons the next day, and after a little arrangement with my mother, concerning the disposal of her business, and the time when I should expect her in Cumberland—after all the minor arrangements which precede a man leaving town for good, and a man about to be married into the bargain—I took farewell of my mother, and went away to Nettlewood once more.

It was my wish that my mother should have been present at my wedding, but she was a woman of business in her way, and declined to leave the shop until Joseph—who had promised to take the matter in hand—had found a customer for it. Bes'des there were so many things to see about, she added, a little enigmatically, and would prefer coming to me in her own way, in three weeks' or a month's time, when "everything" was settled.

To settle everything, then, on my own side, I started, one early morning, for Cumberland, to take up the thread of that romance begun there.

On the evening of the following day, I crossed Nettlewood Ferry once more. This was a few days after Christmas, when the frost had come back again, and there was a fringe of ice round the margin of the lake.

On the Nettlewood side of the Ferry, I found Herbert Vaughan waiting me. My old suspicions concerning him and Letty Ray received almost a death-blow by seeing Mrs. Ray's daughter standing by his side and talking unconcernedly, as the boat's keel ground against the pebbly bank. If I had been deceived in Mr. Vaughan after all—if he were all that could be wished as a husband and a friend!

Very frankly, very warmly he extended his hand towards me as my feet touched the ground.

"Welcome back, Mr. Gear. It is pleasant to get all our old friends in Nettlewood again."

After shaking hands with me, he passed his arm through mine.

"You may imagine that I have much to say to you. In lieu of entering the inn, will you stroll towards Nettlewood House with me—they are impatiently expecting you?"

"Willingly, Mr. Vaughan."

"Letty, see to Mr. Gear's luggage."

"Yes, sir."

Vaughan and I walked along the country road in the direction of Nettlewood House. It was not until we had passed the few thatched residences beyond the Ferry Inn, that he condescended to reply to my interrogative as to whether his sister and mine were well. For a time the meaning of my question did not appear to sink into his mind; he was looking straight before him, and there was an intensity of thought on his face—I could see it in the half-darkness of the night.

"Well," he said, at last—"oh! yes, they are both well."

"I received a letter from your sister three days ago, Mr. Vaughan."

"Yes, yes, I know," he answered, hastily. "In the first place let us speak of her. It is a subject on which we may not agree, and the sooner we end our discussion the better."

"Yes—I think so."

"Allied as I am to you, now, by my marriage with your sister, I have some difficulty in opening this case. Scenes and characters have changed in the few months that we have known each other, and it is as hard to arrive at a fair conclusion to your motives, as, possibly, you have found it to decipher mine. Mine, at least, are easily explained, and have no hidden reasons in the back-ground."

"Surely, you do not think——"

"Patience, Mr. Gear—will you let me lay the matter before you in my own way?"

"Certainly."

"Let me begin by telling you that had I ever dreamed of my sister breaking her solemn promise made to me, and marrying again, I should have remained a single man myself. It is a frank confession, when I assure you that, relying upon your sense of honour, and the firmness of my sister to keep her word, long pledged to me, I married Ellen Gear, two months ago."

"My sense of honour!" I said, not a little warmly, "how has that been affected by my proposal to your sister?"

"I left her in trust to you—I confided in you!"

"Mr. Vaughan, I made no promise to you; I was not bound to study your happiness before my own."

"Pardon me," was the quick reply, "but is it happiness?"

"I believe so."

"I believe that it is one desperate headlong plunge to misery, in which you drag her down with you. I honestly believe that you will be as surely the agent to her early death, as though you had struck at her with a knife.

He uttered this very passionately, but it was with a demonstrative degree of heat that suggested the actor rather than the injured man.

His sharp searching looks into my face that starlight night appeared to me to be watching intently the effect of this simulated passion. For it *was* simulated, although I had only a vague suspicion at the time he spoke to me.

"In what manner do I drag her down with me to so sad a fate, Mr. Vaughan?" I calmly inquired.

"You take away that which has supported her position in society; you dash a delicate woman from riches to beggary with one blow. All the refinements of life, all the luxuries to which she has become habituated, you deprive her of, and replace by what is at the best merely respectable indigence. My sister is a flower whom a breath would injure—only those who have known her and been with her all her life can comprehend her ways."

"My faith to make that life a happy one is very strong, sir, strong as my love for her."

"You would be showing the true strength of that passion and its utter unselfishness by resigning her. I pledge my word that the change will be her death."

"I pledge my word that the change will be new life to her," I answered quickly.

The fears that he would arouse in me I flung back with a hasty scorn which beat them down at once. There was but one more card to play, and he dashed it before me at once—his last stake for the prize he already felt was past all hope of striving for. However, the card was there to play, and he cast it before me like a gauntlet.

"There is one more reason against this match; and I have kept it back for her sake—I rely upon your confidence to let it remain a secret between us. *My sister is mad!*"

He pressed my arm, and hissed forth those awful words with an intensity that iced my blood, though I swerved not for an instant from the settled purpose I had formed.

"She has been mad for years," he continued; "by fits and starts, subject to strange delusions, such as I need scarcely dwell upon at this time. At one period she believed herself in love with Mr. Wenford—if this new passion for yourself should be as evanescent as that old attachment, which, whilst it lasted, deceived so utterly my friend! It was this madness which her late husband feared when he composed so strange a will—it is this madness which I call upon you to consider, ere the fatal step be taken which binds you irrevocably to a demented woman."

"If she be ever afflicted with so sad a malady, Mr. Vaughan," I said, "I will love and cherish her the more. In my hands, and under my unceasing care for her, such delusions as *she may have* shall be dissipated by my true affection. If Mary Zitman do not fear to trust her life with me, I seek—I covet—the responsibility of making it a brighter and more happier one."

"I have done," he said, after a long pause, "I have no more to say. Of my own disappointment, of my downfall, of your sister's, I cannot ask you to consider, whilst the rash impulse urges you onward to a fate I can but pity. In the future days, when you are face to face with all that I have warned you, you will but have yourself to reproach, and I at least shall stand blameless in the matter. There, Mr. Gear, I have done with the subject for ever. *For ever!*" he repeated between the teeth, which closed instinctively like a vice together.

We walked on—the attack had failed, and my defence at least had been too strong for him. It became my turn now, and we changed places.

"Before we reach Nettlewood House, Mr. Vaughan, let me ask you for an explanation of this engagement and marriage with my sister Ellen? Possessing also a sister who has been my care from childhood, to whom I have fancied myself standing in the position of guardian since her father's death, whom I have loved, and who has had few secrets from me, let me ask you rather than her to explain actions which would have borne the light as well as the darkness."

"It is entangled with the subject which, a moment ago, I said should be done with for ever."

"I do not see that."

"It crosses motives of my own which bear not upon the story, and which I too am not called upon to explain. That which affects my wife and you I am ready to allude to."

"I am prepared to listen."

There was another long pause, another of those steady looks down the dark road, as though beyond there in the murkiness of the night by the fragments of the scheme which he had worked with such success. He began.

"I need not call to your remembrance the motive for your first appearance at Nettlewood," he said, "the story of the building plans and of your summons to your fate! My sister, to whom I am compelled to recur again, was then beset by the delusion of escaping from her present home to a new mansion, and of selling to me the old one."

I fancied that his eyes glanced towards me for a moment—that I could see them glittering in my direction. He appeared even to be waiting for my comment on this prelude to his revelations, but the remark struck me more a few days hence than then.

"Possessed with the fear of ghostly figures haunting the old house, of a mysterious danger for ever threatening her within it, she determined to erect a new mansion at a little distance, and sought my advice respecting it. I did not object—I knew that to thwart her, or attempt to reason with her, would but increase her malady; so I drew up an advertisement, soliciting plans for competition, and trusting in time to dissipate her folly. The advertisement was published—the plans arrived in due course—yours amongst the number.

There were three plans more worthy than the rest—yours amongst the number again."

All this explanation appeared to dwell too much upon his sister's weakness of mind—even that fact he kept before me with a persistence—almost a cruelty—that I could not escape from. All the while, not a word from Ellen, or of his engagement to her.

"Well—well!" I said, a little impatiently.

"Patience, Mr. Gear, I am on the threshold of the little mystery that troubles you so much. I am about to wound your feelings, and I naturally pause to consider the most graceful method of doing so."

His lip curled as he spoke, I felt assured. The story of the unfair preference of my plans to "Esperans" was coming now. I could not curtail matters by confessing that I was already well acquainted with it.

"There were three plans," he continued; "two just passing mediocrity, one the work of a man of genius. The man of genius, who signed himself 'Esperans,' was the favourite competitor with Mrs. Zitman; I for reasons of my own, and shutting my eyes against the merits of Esperans's drawings, decided, after two months' deliberation, in favour of yourself."

"And those reasons?"

"Patience, sir," he repeated again; "I have always understood that you were so contented a man, that Patience Gear was often the home cognomen bestowed upon you."

I apologized for the interruption.

"Let me confess to an extraordinary degree of precaution in this matter," he said, "to following step by step the lives of two men during those in which my sister and I resolved to deliberate. I went to London ostensibly on business, really to study the characters of

'Esperans' and yourself. You had addressed us in initials, care of your brother in Newton Street—my father was a solicitor, who had done business in his time for your brother, and there was a loop-hole to his acquaintance, and therefore a clue to your identity. I was not long in discovering that you were a poor clerk in an architect's office, a patient, plodding, unambitious man to all outward appearance. 'Esperans' had inclosed his real name and address in a sealed envelope, which I had opened and resealed before leaving Nettlewood. I shock you," he added, detecting my slight start, "but it was my only means of ascertaining the whereabouts of this mysterious genius, and there was too much at stake to stand upon false delicacy. I found out 'Esperans'—I discovered in him a successful man, a young, clever, and singularly handsome man, with whom my romantic sister would have immediately fallen in love."

"I will not have this!" I cried.

"Pardon me, but she *is* romantic," he said, "and she would have loved this man. I wish to God that she had!" he added, bitterly, "for in summoning you to Nettlewood I overreached myself. This accursed over-caution," he cried, vehemently, "has always been my bane. I thought that Mary Zitman was at least safe with you—you were quiet, unobtrusive, even shy. You were a man who had known poverty for many years of life, and had not the means to keep a wife. For two months at a distance, and by diver's methods, I studied your character—I formed the acquaintance of the family wherein your sister was governess, in order more fully to elicit from her the salient points of your character. I studied you through her, slowly and carefully, and again the over-caution led me astray—I fell in love with your sister Ellen."

"Astray! Surely not astray, Mr. Vaughan?"

"As the result is, what else can I consider it?" he answered, moodily.

"It led to your happiness. You have gained one of the best, one of the most affectionate hearts in the world."

"I am not complaining," he said, coolly; "will you allow me to conclude?"

I nodded assent.

"I disguised, so far as lay in my power, all evidence of the mad passion that suddenly sprang up in my heart for her. I came back to Nettlewood with that passion unconfessed. Even then, unless I could feel assured of my sister's resolve to remain single, I determined not to bring a bride home here to indigence; but when I was most assured of Mrs. Zitman's resolve, I proposed to Ellen. Whilst I was in doubt I went to London several times, and fluttered about the flame that lured me on, and yet which the sternness of my resolution kept from engulfing me. There may be madness in all our family, for my love for her was a madness that could not be resisted—that she saw at last, although I melted not the ice between us with

my burning words. Her splendid beauty turned my brain, but led me not, as I thought, to folly. When my sister, in a paroxysm of excitement, from which she suffers at times, swore at last to remain single for my sake, I foolishly believed in her, and offered my hand to your sister. It had been a long love between us then, and there was no need for a long engagement to follow it. We were married."

"With a secrecy that is, as yet, incomprehensible to me."

"I feared for a while that force of example to Mary; feared even—for she is a strange woman—that she might resent my marriage. Business kept me in London, and until I could break the news myself, I would not risk the discovery to her. But when you were coming to London, I returned hither at once. It struck me that if a few days in Nettlewood were allowed me to reason calmly with Mary for her own future happiness and peace, I should be doing her a service, and rescuing you from an infatuation that must inevitably end in ruin to us all. There, it is a frank avowal of my deeds of darkness. Do you blame me?"

It was frank, but it perplexed me. It was a long and minute explanation, but it scarcely satisfied me. Through all its intricacies I could fancy there ran a darker under-current, which he confessed not, and which the apparent frankness of his manner hid from me. It was, perhaps, a natural struggle to prevent his sister sacrificing a large fortune for my sake, but the stealthy plotting to which he had confessed was startling. This was a man that worked on noiselessly—a man that was dangerous by his silent method of procedure.

If he had told me all, he was a cunning man to be ever on one's guard against—if all this confession were a *melange* of truth and falsehood, pieced skilfully together to deceive and bewilder, it were better that Mary and I were married at once, and an end put to all profitable scheming. In either case I felt sorry, intensely sorry, that this man had become my sister's husband—the conviction of his unworthiness impressed itself more strongly upon me with every step I took by his side. His was a mind to whose depths it would be ever impossible to fathom—there was no comprehending the complex machinery at work behind that high forehead, from which he removed his hat at that moment, to allow the frosty air to cool the fire there.

"Is there anything else I can explain?" he asked.

I hesitated. The night he left for London, when I saved Letty from her search after death in Nettlewood Lake, recurred to me, but I had not seen him on that night, and Letty's manner had changed since then, and rendered the past like a dream. It scarcely seemed my province to intrude upon that ground—to suggest, in that direction, those doubts of him which he might not condescend to explain—which would have only set him against me more, I thought.

For I felt that, though we still walked on side by side, and went in that amiable contiguity along the carriage drive of Nettlewood

House, that I had made him my enemy, and that till his dying day he would never forgive the blow I had struck at his pride and his position.

"Now for the ladies," he said, applying his hand to the knocker, and raising the echoes of the place—"the wife, and the wife that is to be!"



CHAPTER IV.

I AM MARRIED.

THEY were awaiting me anxiously in the drawing-room—Mary and Ellen. Both loving women, born with loving hearts, quick to act upon a generous impulse, and no slaves to ceremony, were at my side before we were scarcely announced.

"My dear Canute!" escaped from both of them.

Herbert Vaughan turned aside with a smile—a quiet smile, expressive of his superiority to these emotions—and the instant afterwards was running his hands through his hair, and studying the general effect of that operation in the great looking-glass above the mantelpiece, or watching the reflection of our figures therein. Which?

I had grown very suspicious lately—the common acts of every-day life seemed to me but feints to conceal a different purpose. It was a bad habit, which would grow upon me, if I did not do my best to check it.

I was even suspicious that there had been stormy days during my absence between Herbert Vaughan and his sister—the sister's face was so much more thin and pale than when I had seen it last.

"You have been ill, Mary," I cried at once; "You have been troubled!"

"No, no—I have been only anxious about you, dear. All the bright smiles and the old light and life will come back now!"

"And Nellie," said I, returning her embrace, "whom I little expected to meet at Nettlewood House, whom I have to congratulate on her wedding, and for whose lasting happiness I have so many best wishes to bestow!"

"Thank you," she answered, "I shall be very happy now, Canute. The troubles of life have gone for ever—the petty vexations of teaching which worried me, and which I used to complain of so often, and

worry you in my turn. And you have no reproaches to make, like a dear generous-hearted brother as you are. No reproaches for keeping my marriage a secret, as Herbert wished, for two or three months, till he could make it up with Mary here! But at last I could not keep that secret from the mother, Canute—it was an unnatural position, and I dashed through it, even a little while before my nervous husband intended. But,” with a bright smile in his direction, “he did not scold me very much—I had only forestalled him by two days, he said.”

“Scarcely more,” he answered.

“Herbert and you are friends?” she asked eagerly.

Herbert veered round from the glass and faced us.

“The best friends in the world,” he said lightly; “friends who have a difference of opinion on divers subjects, but have a graceful habit of expressing it, and don’t feel inclined to cut one another’s throats for the sake of the difference. The very best of friends—eh, Mr. Gear?”

“I see no valid reason why we should be enemies.”

He advanced and held out his hand towards me; we shook hands together, the pledge of our good faith for the future. He did not smile much over the ceremony—he was not a simpering man at the best of times, or when in the best humour. He simply shook hands and relapsed into a seat at the table, taking up that old illuminated missal which I had noticed in his hands the first night of my acquaintance with him.

“Will you not come to the fire, Herbert, and join in the general conversation on matters important to the common weal?” asked Ellen.

“Presently, dear,” he replied; my head aches to-night.

He leaned his forehead on his hand, and bent a little more forward over his book. Looking at him, I noticed that he looked pale and weary that night. Possibly the re-action after his minute attack and defence had set in and was trying him somewhat.

He observed my glance towards him.

“When we are better acquainted, Gear—when you are one of the family, that is—you will perceive that I am a great sufferer at times from these confounded headaches. To-night, too, when I have so much work before me.”

“That don’t mean the key turned in the study lock, Herbert?” asked his wife.

“I am afraid so, to-night.”

After a while, and when we three were seated together, he rose and left the room.

“Hard work ‘and not my will, consents,’” he said, by way of half-quotation before he closed the door after him.

It was a relief to two of us at least to feel that he was gone—possibly to three, for that once.

"You have not quarrelled, Canute?" Ellen asked again, and again I reassured her.

"He is dull and absent to-night," said Ellen, "something appears to have disturbed him."

"My dear Ellen, he is subject to these fits of anxious thought," said Mrs. Zitman; "you must not grieve so early in the day to see a cloud upon his brow. It will come at times—he is a studious man."

"Oh! I am not grieving, Mary," cried Ellen—"I am not going to grieve all my life!"

"I hope not."

"I changed my whole career to be happy, and I shall be ever the most contented of women. Never a one in the whole world, Canute, to say what is preying on the mind of Mrs. Vaughan that she looks so careworn now!"

She said it with a haughty toss of her handsome head—sitting before me she appeared one strong to endure and make no sign. I believed her then, though the words were uttered carelessly, almost lightly. Never a one would know all that story of the life lying beyond.

"Ellen and I have been holding counsel together all day," said my betrothed; "quite a counsel of war, like two romantic girls, as we are in our hearts. We were afraid that Herbert might waylay you at the Ferry, and overwhelm you with his reasons for believing why you and I are the most unfitting couple in the world."

She had adopted Ellen's light vein too, but her face told more than Ellen's.

"What does Ellen think of our engagement?" I asked

"The best thing that could have happened for both of you. But don't tell Herbert, or he will be dreadfully cross. You men," she added, "always think so differently to us women."

"Why, I think it is the best thing that could have happened, too," I said, laughing.

"If it left us very, very poor indeed, I would be glad of it for your sake, Canute, even for the sake of my new sister, who loves you so well, I am trebly glad. And to think that Herbert and I, and Canute and you, will only be a little way apart, if you like this partnership that Mary has been relating to me.

We chatted together pleasantly enough that winter's evening—Mrs. Zitman's face gradually became less thoughtful, less indicative of a suppressed excitement. Ellen's manner, light and buoyant, as befitted a young wife, exercised its effect upon her new sister, particularly after Ellen had twitted her with her grave demeanour.

"My dear Ellen, I am happy enough in my way. To-night," laying her hand confidently in mine, "I was never more happy or more inclined to be thankful."

A short while afterwards, Ellen was seized with the idea that we might feel happier in her absence.

"I am going to rouse that studious husband of mine, and bring—

him back from his lair," she said; there must be no dusty books and papers between him and his love for me."

When she had left the room, Mary Zitman turned her great wondering eyes to me.

"Is it not surprising?"

"What is surprising, Mary?"

"That she should have loved him, married him, and come to this dull house to be shut up with him for ever. That my old life, from which I am escaping, should be taken up when I leave here, and continued on by her who deserved so different a fate. Oh! Canute," she cried, strongly excited, "if I had only known your sister six months, three months ago!"

"What do you know against *him*, that makes you fear so much for Ellen?"

"Hush!—not so loud—the very walls have ears here," she said; "I know nothing, Canute—I have seen nothing; but, still he—he has never loved me much, or been kind to me, and I," dropping her voice to a low whisper, "I fear for her!"

"She is strong—she has seen much of the world, and is naturally light-hearted. This is a love-match, Mary,"

"She is a brave woman—I was always a coward," she said, with a little shudder.

I passed my arm round her, and drew her to my side. She looked into my eyes eagerly still.

"I pray they may be happy together, Mary," I said; "happy as we shall be in the fair afterwards."

"Tell me all that he said to-night to turn you against me?"

"All that he said!"

"You have been very thoughtful—something that he has said is preying on you—something that he has said against me!"

"He has said nothing to alarm me, to shake my love and faith in you—my confidence to make you happy, and to be happy in your true love for my unworthy self."

"You—you will bear with me, Canute, always?"

"Did he say that I should not?"

She started and coloured. I had no doubt of the strength of the attack from which this poor woman had suffered.

"Don't speak of this—don't let us ever recur to the by-gones when we are married. In the new life, the shadow of the old steals away for ever."

"To-morrow I present the licence to our worthy vicar—next Monday I purpose claiming you for good."

"Next Monday to be free—to go away with you, never to return here again! Canute, trust in me ever!—I will never do anything but love you with my whole heart!"

I believed it—I let the gloomy thought which Herbert Vaughan had sown within me go its way down the dark gulf, fitting for such

things' reception. Looking into that face, I could trust the depth and endurance of her love. It never swerved from me—that trust was never abused.

* * * * *

We were married at the little church in the Vale between Henlock and Nettlewood. Married in a simple fashion, befitting the new estate into which we were about to enter.

There was no pomp of circumstance about the wedding—no wedding guests bidden to do honour to the feast. It had been Mary Zitman's wish, seconded by mine. Still, the news of the marriage had been bruited about the Vale, and been carried from the Black Gap mountain to the villages beyond Henlock, where the workmen who toiled at the great house were located, where the villagers had been cheered by the good lady's bounty, where a little news went a great way, and made an extraordinary stir.

Everybody who had the health, or could afford the time, managed to appear at the church doors; the shepherds who had been hunting for "strays" on the mountains, came down at the appointed hour, and peeped through the doors at us: old women and young ones mustered pretty thickly in the time-eaten pews, and watched the ceremony. Mr. Wenford in the Wenford family pew, which he so seldom patronized, sat stolidly surveying the scene, and at its completion came forward to shake Mary Zitman by the hand.

"I'm a rough fellow—a bad fellow—but let me say God bless you, and wish you joy, Mrs. Gear."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"I suppose I must wish joy to you," he said to me, bluntly, "though I haven't forgotten the march stolen upon me. There won't be much joy in the world for her without you, so take my best wishes, if they're worth anything."

"And will you receive my best wishes, Mr. Wenford," said my wife.

"For what?"

"For your better and happier life."

"Thank you," removing the Polichinello cap with which his head was surmounted that morning, "but I'm case-hardened against good wishes. I'm getting more of a knave and villain every day—isn't that true, Vaughan?"

He turned to Herbert Vaughan, an attentive listener to this.

"Not being your father-confessor, how should I know, Wenford?" he answered.

"You know everything!" he said, bursting into a hoarse laugh, that sounded particularly inappropriate at the moment; "you know too much, you clever scamp, you!"

He laid his hand on my brother-in-law's shoulder and shook him

roughly in his boisterous excitement,—shook his hat from his head on to the chequered stones at his feet.

"If you had been a friendly neighbour, you would have asked me to the wedding feast," he said.

"It was my wish," said Vaughan.

"Well, you spared my feelings, all of you," he cried, with a second boisterous laugh, "and I can drink the health of the happy couple at home, instead. By all that's holy, I'll drink myself mad drunk to-night!"

He strode out of the church, and the instant afterwards we heard another peal of laughter echoing in the frosty air outside. He was laughing vociferously still when the wedding party followed—we found him leaning against a tombstone, holding both his gloved hands to his sides. Facing him, shaking a stick at him, and, perhaps, only preventing him from flinging it at him by the pressure of her daughter's hand, stood Mrs. Ray, recently alighted from the fly which Jabez had driven to the church gates.

Not the Mrs. Ray of early days, but an old woman weighed down by a black velvet dress, and a set of costly sables, over which meandered a massive gold chain. Her daughter by her side was in the usual home-spun every-day attire, and rendered contrast with her mother still more noteworthy.

"It's your time to laugh, it seems, Mad Wenford," she croaked, "but my time's coming, you impudent jackanapes. Mayn't I see my own kith and kin married without your impudence?"

"Don't you know that they've broken off the match at the altar—that that's the subject of my laughter, you old witch, you!"

"Oh! good Lud ha' mercy on us all!" shrieked Mrs. Ray, "if it's not a lie, I'm a ruined woman, and shall drop down dead here. Hold me tighter, Letty, I'm a-going!"

She saw us coming from the church—Mary leaning on my arm, and all doubt was dissipated.

"I knew it was another lie of that man's," she cried. "Mrs. Gear," turning to my wife, "I've come a long way to see the bride and bridegroom—to make sure that my long hoped for happiness was coming with your own. Coming to say that I shan't be too proud to see you in the new home you've been kind enough to build for me."

"You are welcome to it all, Mrs. Ray—I am glad to leave my riches behind with my old name. If they do not make you more happy than myself, you will regret the sad inheritance."

"Never—never—never!" cried Mrs. Ray, "it's what I've toiled for all my life—it's what I almost sold my soul for! This day is the happiest that ever I've knowed, or hope to know. Letty, girl, remind me, just for once, to say my prayers to-night. It's on'y common gratitude!"

CHAPTER V.

"JANET'S CHOICE."

It was not the brightest or gayest of wedding festivals; Herbert Vaughan, at least, appeared to do his best, or worst, to give a character of gloom to it. He complained of his old headache more than once, and sat pressing one hand against his forehead, and leaning his elbow on the table in an attitude that was familiar to us.

I believe that all this dulness on his part was assumed; that he had his reasons for depressing us, for evidencing to us that he felt the loss of his sister and of her possessions most acutely. Ellen exerted herself to the utmost; she was always light-hearted even in that house of shadow, and her bright cheery words, her wishes for our happiness, her fancy word-pictures of the future, wherein that happiness would come to us, counteracted the impression which her husband might have possibly wished to convey.

Not that Mary and I should have felt the attempt very keenly, or have suffered from it that day; we were quietly happy; our hearts were full; both were glad that suspense was over and death alone had power to come between us. The last step had been taken, the dark past no more belonged to her, and all the fancies, hopes of the new life were crowding thickly on her. In that past she had never had confidence; in the future she had but one fear—that I might tire of her, and love her less than then. That was a fear easily dissipated, and so the bright vista beyond lay steeped in sunshine, and there was not a cloud to mar its radiance.

We were going at once to our new house at Keswick. I had seen Mr. Sanderson; the partnership between us had been agreed upon; he had found for me a cottage a little way from the town, close to the fair lake of Derwentwater. A little cottage standing on a fair slope of grass land, backed by the distant mountains—a track of fertile land stretching away down the Vale of Borrowdale—Arcadia in the first flush of our honeymoon. A carriage was waiting to take us the circuitous but only route through Henlock and other villages to the foot of the Vale, and round the base of the mountains, across which I had been jolted in a car a little while ago. Twenty-five or thirty miles at least, and therefore a journey necessitating an early start.

When we were ready to depart, Mr. Vaughan kissed his sister and shook hands with me.

"Let me assure you both that I bear no malice," he said, "that the misfortune which this step has brought to me, I will do my best

to support. For each and all of us in this room together a new life from this day—I pray for each and all a better one, and one less liable to misconstruction.”

He looked at his sister steadily as he uttered those last words. The answer to his peroration came at once.

“If I have misconstrued you, Herbert, in any way, at any time, I ask you to forgive me. Remember how sad and lonely a life mine was with you, and how there was much impossible to understand without the solution which you never deigned to give me. If I have been wrong, think no more of it—if we have not understood each other, let it remain in doubt whose fault it was. We need not dwell morbidly upon a past we quit for ever.”

“No,” he answered.

“We shall be better friends now—why, the old love we had as boy and girl may all come back again!”

“It may,” he answered, drily; “I am no prophet, and the future for us all is difficult to guess at. The rose-coloured spectacles you see through have been dashed from my vision, but I am sanguine still. In my own power to work my way unaided, I have confidence. There are many enemies awaiting me, but they must fall!”

He pressed his hand upon the back of the chair against which he was standing with a force that made its joints crack. The enemy beneath that hand would have little hope of mercy.

My adieux with Ellen were not accompanied with half forgiveness, or faint allusions to a past that had been incomprehensible; she flung her arms round me and reiterated her wishes for my lasting happiness—wishes which I returned for her sake.

“You leave me to assume Mrs. Zitman’s position here—has it been so hard a post to fill?” she asked.

“I know very little of the difficulties of it, Nellie.”

“We are different characters—she is a weak woman requiring a strong man’s love—I can fight my way here in a better spirit.”

“I trust you will.”

“Oh! I am confident—in the future, concerning which there has been so much talk, I see nothing to fear,” she said. “God bless you, Canute, ever a dear friend and a good brother!”

She flung her arms round me impetuously, and kissed my cheek. It was wet with her tears, the moment afterwards.

In the hall were assembled the servants to wish joy to their late mistress—the pock-marked man with the low forehead, James Barnes by name, was the most profuse in his congratulations. Janet, with her hand on the door, ready to allow us egress, stood there grim and silent—to the “best wishes, my lady, long life and happiness, my lady,” of her contemporaries, she gave now and then a contemptuous sniff. She was a woman of the world, who knew the value at which to estimate these vain professions of attachment. My wife turned to her at last—the one faithful servant of the past.

"Well, Janet, my own Janet, never a word to the old mistress who worried you to death with her fancies?"

"I canna say mair than these say," she said, with a strange gulping in her throat; "I can think mair, but dinna ken *how* to say it."

"I can guess all that you think," said Mary, taking her great bony hands in hers.

"Na, ye canna—please God, ye ne'er wull!" she cried.

Herbert Vaughan and his wife stood a little apart from them—Janet looked towards them over the childlike figure facing her.

"All I can say now is, God bless ye! All I can promise ye—and it's everythin', lassie—is a bricht life, and mair roses on yeer cheeks frae this day. Mr. Gear," turning to me, "this lassie that I nursed, ye'll take care of and prize?"

"More than my own life, Janet."

"I war sure o' that frae the first," she said, triumphantly.

"And you, Janet," said my wife, still holding her hands in hers, "are not to part from us. Canute and I have talked of this together. You are to serve us in the humble home as you did me in the great one, and we shall wait for your coming every day."

Janet turned red, then white. I could see the hard features soften, and the nether lip quiver very much. After a while she freed her hands, and passed one across her eyes.

"It brings the salt in 'em" she muttered, "but it keeps me firm. Ye're an auld freend, Miss Mary, but Mister Herbert's an aulder. He's a bairn I loved before ye war born, and my heart's loth to quit him. Till he say go, I maun stop here. I *wull*!" she added, with a greater emphasis.

"Herbert will spare me this one friend," said my wife, turning to me, "he will let Janet be with me as of old?"

"Janet has only her choice to make," said Herbert; "I do not seek to influence her. Let her act as her heart prompts her."

"Mister Herbert, I've thoct it ower lang, and I'm na shaken. I'll stay wi' ye, till ye tell me I'm undesarving, and I'd better gae. But oh! my dear young meestress, I'll pray for ye here, and sarve ye here. Ne'er to forget ye in the lang arterwards, when I'm takin' care o' *him*."

Vaughan laughed at Janet's earnestness, laughed in a more triumphant manner when Janet, as if anxious to escape temptation, crossed the hall, and took her place by his side.

"Here is one at least, Mary, who has understood me—who has never misconstrued my actions," he said.

Those were his last words—his last implication that Mary had not thought of him in all fairness, or as a sister should think.

We left them in the hall, and entered the carriage waiting for us. The servants trooped down the steps into the front garden, to give us a parting cheer. Janet followed and flung her shoe after the

carriage. Herbert and Ellen waved their hands to us from the doorway.

My wife flung her arms round my neck, and began to weep passionately.

"Oh! Herbert, if *I have* misunderstood him—have judged him by my own wild thoughts!"

"Well, he has forgiven you, Mary. The curtain falls on the past life."

She clung close to me, and whispered—

"Never let us speak or think of that life again."

BOOK V.

IN THE MISTS.

“ All do so like saints appear,
We know not who's a devil here.”

CANIDIA. 1683.

“ *Exupere.* L'apparence vous trompe, et je suis en effet—
Léontine. L'homme le plus méchant que la nature ait fait.”

CORNEILLE.

CHAPTER I.

KESWICK VISITORS.

LIFE began anew in Keswick for my life—the happiness which friends had prophesied came with it; the forebodings of her brother went further and further distant, might have been represented by the mist upon the mountain tops fading away neath the dawn of fairer weather.

We were very happy—for we were content. There was no regret for the fortune which had vanished, and left her poor by comparison, it had been ever a dead weight upon her natural spirits, and, once removed, she was a different woman. We had shut the door in the face of the past, and resolved never to re-open it and let in the crowd of doubts and mysteries upon the other side—we two sanguine natures who believed implicitly in our power to suppress all memory of the days that had gone. Now and then we verged close upon that past; incidents that we could not escape, and which were allied to it, forced themselves upon us, and brought back some fragments of Nettlewood times, but we held our way, and passed them by as rapidly as possible. It was a gloomy era when she was a rich woman, and lived in the great house of Nettlewood Vale; keep it for ever in the back ground, far distant from the brightness of the present, wherein she lived in earnest and knew no sorrow!

My partnership with Mr. Sanderson had begun, and was likely to prosper. That staid persevering old bachelor, who lived over his office in the High Street, let not the grass grow under his feet, but was a man to push himself forward with the country gentlefolk, and suggest alterations before they had warmed to the idea. He was a practical hard-headed man, much respected in the county; he did his work well and honestly, and had not imbibed that trick of swindling his employers, for which builders as well as other tradespeople are somewhat famous in more civilized districts. He was our “company” at our little cottage in the summer evenings that had come to us six months after we had left Nettlewood—partial to a pipe in the summer-house and a gossip over business progress. I have been ever proud of that man’s confidence in me, of winning in some unaccountable way that man’s affections. He has often attempted to explain it by saying—

“I took to you, Mr. Gear, because you were straightforward,” as though I had been the first straightforward being who had alighted amidst the Cumberland Fells. Still, he “took to me,” and was like

a father to me after his fashion ; I believe that I was ever to him more the son than the partner.

When we settled down in Keswick, I was at first startled by his old-fashioned politeness to my mother, resident then but a stone's throw from our cottage, and had dim visions of his attempt to make a match of it in that quarter. But the vision faded, though the old-fashioned politeness remained, and he always called to ask after my mother's health, before he passed her cottage to proceed to my own.

My mother had disposed of her business, her stock and good-will, at a fair valuation, and had come on to Cumberland in the spring. She had brought with her, at a startling expense, the willow that Ellen had planted many years ago, and it had arrived in Keswick, much damaged from unsympathetic guards and porters, and the clumsy packing of the Cumberland lad who brought it from the station to Keswick in waggon.

"There's been a good deal of dirt packed round its roots," said my mother to me on the day of its arrival, "but they have smashed the branches dreadfully, and I'm afraid it will never get over the shock."

"Was it worth all the expense of conveyance?" I ventured to remark.

"I didn't like to part with it," said my mother, inclined to cry at my unfeeling observation ; "I knew it when it was such a little thing, and to me it's a part and parcel of Ellen's life—Ellen who planted it when she was a child. Everybody told me how expensive it would be to get here, and how impossible for it to live when it arrived, and I gave it up till the last day but one, and then I had two men to take it carefully out of the ground.

"And we'll have two men to put it carefully in the ground, mother," I answered ; "now it's here, I'm very glad to see it. Why it's part of the old home, too!—is it not mother?"

"To be sure."

"She's a woman of feeling, that mother of yours," said Mr. Sanderson, who had heard the dialogue ; "she's got a little poetry in her somewhere, and it will keep her heart green and young to the last. Let's you and me lend a hand to the willow this evening—we'll take more care than the strangers."

So Mr. Sanderson and I planted the willow in Cumberland soil ; and the former backing against the house to obtain a good perspective view, muttered :

"It's in a awful condition, and I'm afraid will never get better, lad. You'll have to break that fact to your mother by degrees.

I had seen it arrive at Kennington Road under circumstances almost as adverse to its chances of existence, and so had faith in the life of it still. I even expressed that faith to my mother, who had been watching rather ruefully the operation of planting, and kept her

sanguine till the late spring, when it struggled once more into greenness.

My mother ran breathless to our cottage one morning, with the glad tidings that there was a bud shooting forth, and Mary and I congratulated her on the event. I believe she wrote to Ellen that evening a full account of the discovery that she had made.

This was in the spring, and my story re-opens in the summer time—in the late June days, when Cumberland ever looks its best. In the interim between my marriage and the early summer time, not a great deal had occurred to affect the progress of this story. Ellen and her husband were in the great house at Nettlewood still; it had become the property of Herbert Vaughan, by some means which I could not understand—which it was not my business to discover. The sole executor to the will of the late Mr. Zitman and Mr. Edwards, the rector of Nettlewood and Henlock, and he, at least, was satisfied with the particulars of the case. Herbert had purchased the house of his sister, and the money had been paid into her bankers at Carlisle—it was all plain and clear, here were his deeds, and there was his sister's banker's book to testify to the fact. The house's worth in lieu of the house, and no clause in the will exempting the widow from buying or selling. The Ferry Inn had passed into our hands, and was let to Jabez Clarke, who had become ambitious of setting up in business for himself. The house that I had designed, and the building of which I had superintended, was along with much money and land—now in the possession of Mrs. Martha Ray.

These were the chief changes that had come over Nettlewood; over Newton Street, City, in the house of my brother Joseph, had occurred a greater one. His wife had caught cold and died in the month of April last, and he was left a widower in London. My mother's first impulse was to go and keep house for him—to take herself and the willow into the City of London once more. She wrote, making the offer, and the reply balked the motherly intention.

"I am going to retire from business," he said, "and shall take furnished apartments a little way out of town. If I haven't saved much money, still a little contents me, and I have learned to live on a little."

The last part of this assertion was true enough, but the veracity of the preceding remarks might be open to doubt from friends and acquaintances of Joseph Gear. Still, it did not affect us; we did not want to borrow any money of him, though he might have feared the possibility of the occurrence, and have prepared his ground accordingly. Heaven forgive me!—I was always suspecting that brother, whose head was so much "shrewder" than my own.

My mother shed a few tears over Joseph's loss, as she would have shed tears over the loss of any stranger who had called attention to

the fact in the first column of the *Times*; but Joseph's wife had not been a woman to love us, or be loved by us, and, at least, we did not feel one friend the less. I, who had just married, could realize the fact of the awful sense of loneliness which my brother must experience, and wrote to him a letter of sympathy with his position.

In answer he agreed with me that it was very lonely, and that only he could estimate the acuteness of his harrowed feelings, and that my letter had cost him twopence, the sympathy being extended over two sheets, and above the half ounce for which I had paid.

We heard no more of Joseph Gear after that—he had never been a regular correspondent.

From Ellen my mother received news more frequently; once a week a letter reached her—consequently reached me—from Nettlewood House. We learned the news by these means, such news as Ellen felt disposed to give us. She was always happy and content—Herbert made her the best of husbands—a little less studious and fond of his book, perhaps, would have made him more companionable now and then—but life passed pleasantly and there was nothing to regret.

Every week that news, varied a little by the method of communicating it, but implying ever the same facts, my mother always bringing me the letter to read to her, Ellen writing a dashing hand, that certainly verged at times, on "sweet illegibility," and was hard for my mother, who liked round hand best, to decipher.

"What a blessing it is she's so comfortably settled," my mother would remark every time a letter was read to her; "thank the Lord, to think she is so happy!"

My wife looked at me inquiringly after she had gone, but I did not offer to discuss the subject. Why should I have any doubt as to that happiness, of which she boasted, which she seemed anxious to impress upon us by her constant almost strange reiteration. Neither she nor her husband asked us ever to visit them, or come to visit us—they were contented together, perhaps, and their marriage was not of long duration yet. As the days went by, we should all be more sociable together!

All this by way of preface before the second act of a romance which we believed had died out, began in that summer time to which I have alluded.

It was a bright morning at the end of June, when a visitor arrived at our cottage on the out-skirts of Keswick. I was leaving home to proceed to the office in High Street, and had Mary accompanied me as far as the wicket gate, when a two-horse Clarence stopped in the roadway twenty feet below us.

"Ellen and Herbert," said my wife, at once; "they have thought of us at last."

She came down the sloping path to the high road, leaning on my arm; meanwhile a footman had left the coachman's side, opened the

carriage door, and was assisting out with difficulty the visitor, when we arrived.

The visitor was a lady in a yellow tuscan bonnet with amber plumes—a feeble lady, who fell forward into the footman's arms as the door opened, and very carelessly brought the crutched handle of a stick she was carrying against the footman's forehead; an old lady, who was lifted out, and who hooked herself adroitly on to the arm of the footman aforesaid—a tall man whose eyes were watering very much just then.

Mary clutched my arm impetuously.

"Mrs. Ray!" she whispered.

"Certainly a lady we did not expect, Mary, or whose company we have been anticipating," I remarked.

"Oh! I am sorry she has come! I always feared her, Canute—I am sure she brings bad news."

"Courage, my wife, we have lost our nervousness these six months."

"I shall be always strong with you," she answered; "I will not believe even in the bad news yet awhile."

"No—why should you?"

Mrs. Ray and her escort came face to face with us. I had expected her daughter to follow from the carriage, but Mrs. Ray was unaccompanied.

"Good morning t'ye both—I hope you're not very sorry to see an old friend for once."

"You are welcome, Mrs. Ray," I said.

"Thankee I thought I might be. Do you live up that hill there—you two?"

"Yes."

"Good Lord! what a place. Let me get in and sit down. Keep me up, John, and not stand there feeling your forehead—what's the matter with you?"

"It's the sun, marm—and that stick," he added, more resentfully.

"Go on, go on, and don't stand chattering there. There never was a man who talked so much, and knew his place so little."

Mrs. Ray and her footmen preceded us up the slope, Mrs. Ray discoursing all the way, and looking round at us, as that ghastly face had looked over her shoulder at me so many times when I was lodging at the Ferry Inn.

"I thought I'd like to see how you two were a-getting on," she said; "you ring-doves that loved each other so much. Oh! this hill—I'll never come up again as long as I live, mind you."

My wife looked up at me and laughed, when Mrs. Ray's back was turned; a very gorgeous back, consisting of a white china-crape shawl, with elaborate embroidery, beneath which was a green silk dress, just a trifle too short, disclosing silken-clad malformations.

"I—I haven't come from Nettlewood to-day, she remarked, in short windy puffs, as her breath became more laboured during the ascent; "stayed at a friend's half way—my friend, the Justice's. Hold up, John. Justice Cofferton, whose daughters used to think so much of themselves—you know 'em, Mrs. Gear?"

"Oh! yes," replied my wife.

"Drabs of gals, I call 'em—proud and gawky, and time-sarving. I allus did—hate—time-sarving people. Hold up, John, do."

"I ham!" cried the exasperated John.

The old lady was safely landed in the parlour at last; she made a dash at the first chair, and sat fanning herself with her lace handkerchief.

"I shall be better in a minute—it's them palpitations that fluster me so. You can go, John, and cover the horses up. We don't want anything the matter with them through *your* carelessness."

John departed, and we sat down in our "best room," and awaited the recovery of Mrs. Ray's breath. It was a long time returning to her, or appearing to do so, and the sharp grey eyes wandered about the room, taking stock of its contents. After a while they settled upon my wife.

"You're none the wus, Mrs. Gear," Mrs. Ray commented.

"No," with a musical laugh; "I am all the better, Mrs. Ray."

"I thought it might be so, but I was curious-like. And you have altered, surely. Why, you can't be unhappy!"

"Unhappy with this home, and this dear, loving husband, who spoils me by giving me my own way too much!" she cried, impetuously.

"Um!" remarked Mrs. Ray, "it's genewin, but it's sickening. It's hardly what I expected, considering what a miserable woman you was."

"Your daughter is well, I hope?" I said, making an effort to turn the conversation.

"Well—oh! yes—but a comfort to me or herself,—oh! no. She don't seem to vally the rightful position we okkepy at last; she's not grateful to me for making a lady of her, and giving her a governess to polish her up as fast as possible. The money that I've spent on her—good gracious! The money that she'll come into some day, if she behaves herself—dear, dear!"

"Let us hope at least that you enjoy the change, Mrs. Ray."

"I should have 'joyed it better, if I had been sarved more fairer," she answered, sharply; "I was done out of the old house clean, somehow. That man mixed up matters, and stirred 'em round and round till the deuce hisself couldn't tell which was fair and which was downright swindling. If he ain't feathered his nest nicely, and bothered that foolish old secutor, I'm clean daft!"

"Let me remind you that you are speaking of Mrs. Gear's brother," I said.

"Oh! I know who I'm speaking about," she responded; "and Mrs. Gear knows him better than I do, though she says so little, and keeps so much about him under lock and key. You don't know half that she knows of that man, sir."

Mary's face flushed crimson, and then became deadly white—she wrung her hands silently together in her lap.

"Ain't that true, Mrs. Gear?" said this disagreeable old woman.

"Canute and I never speak of the past, or of all that made me unhappy therein."

"Oh! Canute and you are a wonderful pair!" sneered the old lady; "what an ornament you two would make under a glass shade in my drawing-room. I like large ornaments."

I looked at my watch, as a hint to Mrs. Ray that time was precious. But she was in no hurry to begone; on the contrary, began to unfasten her bonnet strings, and loosen her crape shawl.

"Mind you," she said, beginning with her favourite phrase, "Herbert Vaughan's ony done what I should have done in his place, and he's done it well, too. It may be aggravating, but I bear it, and am friends with him. If he opens a new lead mine with Mad Wenford, and nobody can't fathom where the money comes from, it's all the more creditable to the way in which he's *wropped* it up."

The old woman was a satirist; she stung you with words that it would have been absurd to take offence at.

"Opened a lead mine!" said Mary.

"Yes—he and that lout have bought the Nettlewood Crag as a speculation—ha! ha! ha! they're going to make their fortunes now. Your first husband hankered arter that crag, and thought there was no end of metal in it, Mrs. Gear; but he was of a cautious nature, like his sister, and didn't care to venture."

"Yes, he was a cautious man," said Mary, with a perceptible shiver; "and the lead mine," she added, hastily, "has it begun yet? Tell me more about that, please?"

"I don't know anythink about it—it's no business of mine. If it fails—which I think it will—I shan't break my heart. But this isn't what I come here for, Mr. Gear."

She shifted her chair ingeniously from the window across the room to my side without rising. A similar feat to save the necessity of getting up, I had seen her carry out with success at the Ferry Inn.

"That new house you built, Mr. Gear, isn't to my taste."

"Indeed!"

"It's all askew-like, and there isn't one room big enough to swing a cat in, much less to see your friends and give them welcome. And I'm going to see such lots of friends soon. I haven't had much fun for my money yet awhile, and Letty gives me the horrors and the creeps. So I want the drawing-room, that looks on the old shop and the old Ferry, made twice as big. And there's other alterations,

and you must come and see to 'em, Mr. Gear. If I have a friend in business, I like to give him a turn," she added patronizingly.

This was a business order, to which I had an objection, but which, neither for my partner, nor my own sake, I had a right to refuse. Mary looked at me, and failing to attract my attention, broke in with—

"Oh! Canute, you will not go back to Nettlewood again?"

"My dear girl have I a right to refuse?"

"Is it worth while?—is it necessary?"

"It'll come to a good deal of money, I'm told," said Mrs. Ray; "you oughtn't to be too independent. And if you're afeard to be here all alone for a week or two, Mrs. Gear, why there's good lodgings at the Ferry Inn. At least there was when I kep it."

"Oh! may I come with you, Canute?"

"If you will. If there be any necessity for a long stay there. But we will talk of this presently."

"Ah! don't take up people's time by a lot o' nonsense now. There's my horses catching cold in their insides all this time I'm waiting here. But, but," looking very anxiously towards my wife, "I think I'd come with him and bring your best dress with you. There'll be a rare house-warming when the room's done; Letty's 'coming out,' as the governess calls it—as if she hadn't been a-coming out—hot and strong—all her blessed life! Yes, yes," with a stamp of her stick on the floor, "we shall have a grand party when the room's done, and there'll be a crowd of fine people to attend the old woman's feast, much as they turned their noses up when I was poor."

"Did I turn up mine?" asked my wife with a smile.

"You hadn't sperit enough—you were kep down under your brother's thumb, and hadn't a soul of your own. But you didn't laugh at me, and you I shall be glad to see of all 'em—you and this artichecting chap. When'll you come?" she asked, turning suddenly to me—"to-morrow?"

"I must consult Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Ray."

"Bother Mr. Sanderson," she ejaculated; "you must come to-morrow—I want the room done at once—I who am old and feeble can't afford to waste time."

"I think I may promise to visit Nettlewood to-morrow, then."

"I rely upon you," said she, shifting her way back to the window, which she flung wide open and screamed through for John.

"That man's a caterpillar I should like to scrunch!" she said vindictively as John came dawdling up the slope again.

"Are you going now, Mrs. Ray?" asked my wife.

"Yes, yes—my friend the Justice will wonder where I've got to. If you had a glass of good old port in the house, I'd drink your health in it."

"I beg pardon," said Mary, hastily, "I had forgotten. Canute, dear, there is a bottle of port wine in the house, I think."

"Hark to that!" cried Mrs. Ray, "a woman who kep her cellar of wines, and now don't know if there's a bottle in the house. Woman," almost fiercely, "you must feel the change more than your looks show."

"I feel that the change has been for the better."

"That you wouldn't go back to the old life?" said Mrs. Ray.

"Not for all the wealth that lies hidden in the Cumberland mountains," she cried warmly; "not for all the money in the world!"

"You're a strange woman—you were allus strange," muttered Mrs. Ray.

By this time I had disinterred my bottle of wine from the cellaret, and had poured out a glass of port for Mrs. Ray.

"Here's wishing you health, young people. Here's thanking you for bearing an old woman no malice for stepping atween you and your riches. You don't hate me, Mary Gear, in your heart?" she asked, pausing with the glass to her lips.

"Why should I hate you?" asked my wondering wife.

"I am a ghost of the old life you dread so much to return to—I may have sought to harm you in it for your money's sake, or wished you harm for my own. Say forgiven—everything!"

She leaned forwards on her stick with intense eagerness—she held her breath for Mary Gear's reply.

"Forgiven," said my wife lightly, "to be sure—everything that you think requires forgiveness from the depths of my new and glad heart."

The old woman drank her wine off in one gulp like a dram-drinker.

"Here's luck to this couple—they shan't say any more in Nettlewood that I wish everybody harm. Now, John," taking the footman's arm as he entered, "look where you're going, and *do* hold up better."

"Can I be of any assistance, Mrs. Ray?" I inquired.

"Oh! no. John knows my step best—good day to you."

Outside the house, and proceeding down the hill, the sallow face slowly turned and looked back at us.

"To-morrow from my window I shall be watching Nettlewood Ferry all day," she said; "don't forget!"

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD BATTLE-GROUND.

A LITTLE consultation with my partner and my wife settled the matter. Mr. Sanderson thought it was business to accept Mrs. Ray's offer, and I, who had an inventor's horror of a stranger's improvements, became more inclined every instant to undertake and superintend the alterations of Mrs. Ray's mansion. It was the first complete plan that had ever been realized of mine; it had brought me a partner; it had been the means of bringing to my side the dearest wife in the world—I had an affection for that house.

"Mary listened to all that my partner and I had to urge, and finally broke in with:

"But I am to go to Nettlewood. Under any circumstances, and in the face of any difficulties, you must let me accompany you."

"The place never agreed with you, Mary."

"Anywhere and everywhere will agree with me now—I can't be left alone in Borrowdale," said Mary. "Will you not side with me, Mr. Sanderson?"

"Am I such a sinful man as to attempt to part husband and wife?" he answered.

My fear was for Mary's health in Nettlewood, and for past associations disturbing her mind somewhat. She was brave now, and feared nothing with me. So it was arranged that we should start for Nettlewood very early on the following morning, and that during our absence my mother should look after our cottage now and then.

"If you're very long away I shall come in search of you," said my mother; "I have a good excuse in my anxiety to see Ellen, who seems to have forgotten her poor mother. And another excuse in my new daughter, who for more reasons than one, I hope will be very careful of herself."

Mary blushed, and promised to be very careful, as though I should not have been very careful of her, especially at that time. In four or five more months, were we not both looking forward to a brighter life than we had yet experienced?—to a well-spring of gladness in a child that should add joy to our home? Everything lay fair before us in the future, when we set forth for Nettlewood—the shadows that had haunted us, and were born of fever fancies, did not daunt our progress or approach more near to waking life when we were in the Vale again.

We crossed the Ferry at eight in the evening, Mary and I. It was not dark at that hour in the long June twilight; the stars were glittering but feebly in the grey sky above our heads; behind the western chain of mountains the faint glow of the sunset was reflected yet.

Jabez's man rowed us across in the small ferry-boat. Jabez, proprietor of the Ferry Inn, smoked his pipe on the Nettlewood side of the lake, and watched our arrival with his hands in his pockets. All was very still that summer evening; only the plash of the oars disturbed the silence; there was a dead hush in the Vale, not a leaf on the few trees near the inn was rustling—all was steeped to the lips in peaceful rest. For a moment I glanced towards my wife, sitting by my side in the ferry-boat. Already my awakened fancy suggested that the face was paler, and that a faint reflex of its old anxious looks had stolen there already.

"How still!" she whispered, meeting my glance.

"It is a lovely evening!" I said; "I have never seen the Vale more beautiful."

"Yes—it is beautiful," she responded, in an absent manner.

The past—that which we had abjured—would come back—would steal from the silence and meet her at the Ferry. It was not possible—afterwards I knew it was not natural—that all should be forgotten, when the first view of the old home brought back in all its vividness the old melancholy life.

"You are tired, Mary—the journey has been too much for you," I said.

"I shall be better presently. My head aches just a little now."

Something in my looks appeared to suggest that I had begun to doubt the propriety of bringing her to Nettlewood. She roused herself and looked more bright.

"Don't be afraid that my nerves will give way ever again," she said; "by your side, dear Canute, I am always strong!"

We reached the Nettlewood side of the Ferry. Jabez pulled his forelock respectfully, and bade us welcome, as old friends, as proprietors of the Ferry Inn, which he rented of us at sixteen pounds a year.

"All well here, Jabez?" I inquired.

"All well, Sir."

"And business?"

"Just about as slack as ever, thankee, sir. We've one towrist in the house, or one something, I don't exactly make out."

"Then the old 'best room' is occupied, Jabez?"

"No, he won't have a best room—he keeps to one bed-room, and the tap-room. He don't spend a—oh! here is!"

Through the door of the Ferry Inn came, at a slow pace, the diminutive form of my brother, looking a very black spot on the landscape in his widower's mourning.

"Joseph!" I exclaimed.

He came towards us at a somewhat increased pace—when he was close upon us, I could see that his face was paler and more lined than I had ever noticed it. Was there something in the Nettlewood air that made people old before their time, I wondered?

"I heard you were coming," he said; "how d'ye do?"

We shook hands together.

"This is your wife—Mrs. Zitman that was," turning to Mary; "I hope you're well, ma'am?"

My wife replied that she was very well, and looked at me for an introduction, or an explanation.

"This is my brother, Joseph Gear, Mary," I said; "an unexpected friend to find located in the Vale here."

"I was thinking of writing to you, Canute," he said, with a laboured sigh, "but I haven't had the heart to write to anybody yet. I've sold the business—I—I hadn't the heart to carry it on. She was a great loss to me—you don't know how I miss her."

"I can imagine that the blow was a heavy one, Joseph."

"I have come here for change of air and scene, hearing you speak of Nettlewood so much."

"I hope the change will do you good, Mr. Gear," my wife remarked.

"Thank you. I hope so. I don't feel very much cheered yet by the change—it's rather quiet after living in Cheapside. How's mother?"

"Very well, thank you. And Ellen—whom you have seen I suppose?" I asked.

"Ye—es, I have seen her. She's well and in excellent spirits," he added, his brow contracting a little, I fancied with an unpleasant reminiscence; "I have never seen her in better spirits. How do you think I am looking, Canute?"

"Paler than usual."

"Less robust now?"

"No," surveying his slender proportions, "I think not."

"The landlord weighs me every morning—there's a falling off somewhere. I'm not what I used to be—I who used to have no nerve at all or be all nerve, am now as nervous as a kitten. Do you think this place agrees with everybody?"

"I cannot say," I said, "I would not stop here, Joseph, if I doubted it. Cross the Ferry, take a mountain car to Borrowdale, and see the mother whose heart yearns for a glimpse of you."

"Thank you—yes, I will soon, perhaps. I've—I've promised Ellen to stay a week or two in the neighbourhood."

"I should have thought that they might have found room for you at the House," I remarked, with a little honest English scorn at the want of hospitality exhibited.

Joseph began to shiver.

"Oh! lor, I wouldn't stay there for the world!" he said.

"The place even deters him!" I could see written on the curious face of my wife, but I fancied it was more likely to be Herbert Vaughan and his ways, than Nettlewood House and the gloom which hung over it.

We proceeded to the Ferry Inn—at the gate Joseph branched off.

"I'm going for a little stroll—I shall see you again," he said, before he departed down the green lane.

A substantial tea was awaiting us at the Ferry Inn. Mrs. Ray had called that morning on Jabez, and assured him that my wife and I were certain to appear in the course of the day, and Jabez had prepared accordingly.

Every one in Nettlewood had expected us, it appeared—on the table were two little notes for us—one from Mrs. Ray, the second from my sister Ellen.

The former presenting the compliments of Mrs. Ray to Mr. Canute Gear, and trusted that the fatigue of the journey would not prevent her having the pleasure of seeing him that evening—the latter was dashed off in the old hasty style:—

"DEAR CANUTE,—Don't forget us all at Nettlewood House. Alone to-night.

"Your affectionate sister,
"NELLIE."

"Alone to-night!" cried Mary, leaping to her feet; "I will go to her at once."

"Patience, my dear," said I, exerting my husband's authority; "you are already fatigued from the effects of your long journey, and I will have no extra labour entailed on you to-night."

"Herbert is away, and she is alone, Canute," said my wife. "Oh! I know what it is to be all alone in that house! All the noises—and the dark passages, with figures flitting in them that may be servants or spectres, you are in doubt which—the echoes that reverberate from floor to floor when a door slams or a something falls. She will feel very dull and desolate there."

"She is not a nervous woman, Mary. You must remember that, at least."

"You will have to proceed to the Rays on business—will you go on to Nettlewood House, Canute, and spend half an hour with Ellen?"

"And leave *you* all alone?"

"Oh! I have much to do. The big portmanteau, where all my fine things are crumpled, to unpack—the room to arrange after my own fashion, and make it so like home, and you will not know it on your return. And if your brother Joseph comes back, I shall have to seek him out, and learn from him all those faults and failings which you have hidden so carefully from me."

"Or which you will not see, Mary," I added.

Mary laughed—we were both in excellent spirits, and she was very solicitous that I should call on Ellen after my visit to the Rays; so I promised to see Ellen that night, and after tea hurried away. Ellen and I had not had a chance of a *tête-à-tête* since her marriage.

I proceeded at once to Mrs. Ray's house. My creation was finished then, and in that fair summer night, with the moon that had risen shining on it, I was proud of my work. I was backing a little to survey it at a different angle, when I backed against brother Joseph coming down the lane.

"What, Joseph!—have you been to Ellen's?"

"Not to-night. I have been walking to the head of the Vale, and have just given Mrs. Ray a call."

"Mrs. Ray!"

"I thought it was but common politeness, as she only arrived here this afternoon."

"Do you know Mrs. Ray?"

"Ellen introduced me last week. A charming gossiping lady, with a flow of humour that cheers me up at times."

"You surprise me!"

"I don't see anything to be surprised at," said he a little warmly, "what do you mean?"

"Your favourable opinion of Mrs. R. somewhat surprises me," I said, laughing; "she don't hit everybody's fancy exactly. Good night, Joseph."

"Oh! good night," he said tetchily.

Proceeding up the garden, I felt compelled to laugh again, at the oddity of brother Joseph's manner—at the unreasonableness of a suspicion more odd still that seized me then. It had its humorous side, but it had its stern side also, and *that* sobered me. But after all, it was only a suspicion, and need not disturb me yet, even if I considered it my business to be ever troubled with it at all.

The house was very dark and dull. From all the windows fronting the carriage-road there shone not forth one glimmer of light—looking towards it a few minutes since from the Ferry Inn, had but shown me as lustreless a side turned towards the sleeping water. To my summons a man-servant appeared.

"Mrs. Ray was within—was my name Gear?—would I please to follow him?"

To my surprise we went downstairs to the ground-floor—to a large room set a little apart from the household offices. This I had intended for a housekeeper's room, but Mrs. Ray evidently had a different opinion of its appropriateness.

"Mr. Gear," the servant announced.

There was a fire burning in the grate that evening, despite the mild summer air without—there were two figures before it that night, who, but for the difference in their dress, have been the figures

I had left, six months ago, in their old positions before the kitchen fire in the Ferry Inn. Nothing was changed but the light silk dress of the mother, the dark silk dress of the daughter. One chair was planted in full front of the fire, and Mrs. Ray sat there, with her two thin hands outspread in her usual fashion—on a low seat at the side, clutching her chin after the old habit, sat Letty Ray, staring as thoughtfully at the red coals as though the future were still as hard to guess therein as when fortune had not deigned to smile upon her. More, it was the old face, grave and stern, with its intensity of thought; cold and hard with its repellent handsomeness.

Mrs. Ray's head moved without her body, in that peculiar manner which practice had rendered most convenient to her.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Gear," she said; then added, "Letty, here's Mr. Gear, the articheet—where's all the manners you've been larnt lately?"

"I am glad to see him," said Letty, rising at this reproof—"I hope you are well and happy, sir."

"Both, Miss Ray."

"That's proper—that's nice," croaked the old lady, "Miss Ray's the proper word now!"

"I have not grown so proud, but that I would prefer to be called Letty by an old friend, sir," she said; "I hate to be Miss Ray'd about."

"You hate everything that I knows on," grumbled the mother, "or that I cares for! Upon my word, sir," dropping her voice to a feeble whine, "she hasn't improved a bit."

"Your wife is well and happy, too, Mr. Gear?" asked Letty.

"Thank you—I am glad to say that she is well and happy now."

"She deserves it she is a good woman," murmured Letty, "and good women are scarce in Nettlewood."

"Indeed!" I answered.

The remark was a strange one, and elicited a strange tone in my reply, which she noticed.

"At least I think so," she added; "but I am a poor innkeeper's daughter, and am not supposed to have much powers of perception. In all my life, to my thinking, I have known but one good woman here."

"Ah! you've knowed a mighty lot—you have!" commented the mother; "if you'd only know a little better all that I keep paying such a blessed sight of money for, it'd be more satisfactory. Take a seat, Mr. Gear—have you done the plans?"

"Done them, Mrs. Ray! I scarcely know what alterations you intend to make yet."

"Didn't I say I wanted a big drawing-room, and a large libery, and a new room over the libery, where I can shut myself in when I am inclined to study a bit?"

"I do not think you mentioned all those alterations, Mrs. Ray."

"I don't think you took much trouble to listen to them," she snapped. "Letty, pull that bell till somebody comes. Keep on pulling—they'll larn then to move a little faster in this house."

When the servant appeared, Mrs. Ray asked for a chamber-candlestick, which being produced in due course, she said,

"Show the rooms to Mr. Gear, Letty—my legs won't keep me up to-night. You know all that I want."

"Yes."

"Show him over the best rooms, Letty, and let him look at the furnitur. He won't find such hanson' cheers in Nettlewood, or half as much gold about 'em. We live down here when we don't expect company, Mr. Gear, because there's no occasion to wear things out too soon. Look alive, Letty, I'm very tired with my journey."

Letty and I departed—Letty leading the way. We went direct to the drawing-room, handsomely furnished enough, but aflare with gilding and ormolu, and painted velvet chairs and couches. Nowhere anything of a neutral tint, of a soft shading, for the eye to seek relief in.

"This is our best room now," she said, with a curling lip; see what money can do!" she added, unconsciously quoting from old Brome.

"Are you tired of the money already, Letty, or disdainful of the new position to which it has raised you?"

"Perhaps it ~~is~~ better" she said; "I haven't much time to think about it—I don't regret the past, if I can't see anything very bright before me. Nothing before me, Mr. Gear," said she, "like that which you once prophesied for me."

"The days are early yet."

"Sometimes I feel that we are robbers here, Mr. Gear—at other times, that we are only in possession of our rights. But then my mind is always on the change, and I am never two days alike. I was a gloomy disappointed woman when you knew me first, and in this new estate I cannot set that character aside. But I am trying," she cried, flinging back her head disdainfully, "I am learning to be proud!"

I was admiring her new manner then, the haughty carriage, the handsome face and figure. With much of her past brusqueness, there was still something of the new estate refining and subduing her. She would learn to be a lady in good time, I saw.

"You perceive how to enlarge this room without spoiling the general design?" she asked.

"Yes—I think so."

"This way then."

I knew the way as well as Letty Ray about the house—every turning in the mansion had been my study, and had not grown indistinct yet.

We went over the best rooms, as Mrs. Ray had desired—beyond the dining-room, it struck me that a library might be extended, and a new room built above it, as suggested by the proprietress. Returning to the housekeepers room, Letty said suddenly,

“Have you seen your sister yet?”

“I am going to her house in a few minutes. You see her now and then, I presume?”

“We are neighbours—she and her husband visit here occasionally. Mr. Gear,” in a manner still more abrupt than I had noticed hitherto; “I don’t like your sister.”

“You are the first person who has ever said that, I believe,” I said, a little coldly.

“I am a plain woman,” she answered, “and do not shrink from a plain confession. I have tried more than once to show her my antipathy, but she beats it down in some way, whilst she is here. When she is gone, I dislike—hate her worse than ever!”

“Why do you tell me this?”

“I don’t know—I feel that I should be a hypocrite, if I were to profess a love for her I did not feel. I have a hope that you will tell her this, and that she may understand me better. That’s all.”

“And her husband—do you hate him too, for her sake?”

Her hand went hastily to her bosom, as though I had stabbed her there—those great dark eyes flashed fire at me.

“Do I hate him?” she repeated; “why do you say that to me?”

“I thought it might be possible.”

“Well—yes—I *hate him too!*”

She set her white teeth together, and spoke through them, but there was hesitation in her answer, and it had required some reflection before it was hissed forth. Back to the surface of the stream, to the depths of which it had been long submerged, floated an old suspicion to my brain. On the old battle-ground the ghosts were rising to war again with every sober thought.

“Let us return,” she said, with a little shiver; “unless you have any more questions to ask me?”

“Not any.”

“May I ask you one?”

“Certainly.”

“What brought your brother to Nettlewood?”

I was doubtful how to answer this—if I even had the power to answer.

“I know what keeps him here,” she said; “but what brought him to a place like this?”

“A desire for change of air and scene, he tells me—I had spoken of Nettlewood to him more than once.”

“He tells you,” catching at my words; “then you doubt him?”

“No, no—why should I doubt my own brother?”

“I doubt him,” said Letty; “I doubt the motive that brings him

here. He is a sordid wretch, who would sell his soul for money—I shall have to tell him so presently.”

“Has he fallen in love with you, Letty?” I asked.

“With me!” she cried disdainfully, “such a man as that insult me by a thought! If he dared I would strike him, I think.”

“You don’t mean—surely you don’t mean—”

“I mean that he is playing a shallow part here, and that my mother sees it as clearly as I do, and laughs at him when his back is turned. Tell him so!”

“I think I will,” I said reflectingly.

“Are there any more of you Gears?” she asked after this.

“Only my mother.”

“You are the most contrary people whom I ever remember to have met. What makes you so different from your brother and sister?”

“Perhaps there is no difference,” I remarked.

“You I can take to—you, I once thought, was the very man fitting for a brother to me—one to whom I could tell my troubles, and feel strengthened by his kind advice, his brother’s love. But the rest of you!”

She stamped her foot impatiently on the stone landing-place outside the housekeeper’s room, where she had paused to make that last remark before entering. Mrs. Ray was waiting for us in a spirit as impatient as her daughter’s.

“What a time you’ve been!” she said; “what have you been talking about? Me?”

“No,” said Letty.

“Well, the alterations. If you’ll do the drawing-room first, we’ll have the house-warming at once. The libery won’t want warming much, at any time.”

“You shall see my rough plan to-morrow, Mrs. Ray.”

“Thankee. You won’t stay supper, of course?”

“No, thank you. I have a visit to pay.”

“To your sister?”

I replied in the affirmative.

“Ah! she’s a nice gal—there’s style there which Letty won’t imitate, though she can take off some people that nobody wants her to, fast enough. There’s life in Mrs. Vaughan—she makes the best of everything, and keeps the worst of it at home. She’s a woman you may well be proud of, Mr. Gear.”

This assurance, so distinct from her daughter’s, pleased me. It was the truer criticism—and strangely enough, more frank and genuine than Letty’s. Had setting Ellen up for a model offended Letty Ray, and turned her against my sister?—or was there something deeper and more antagonistic that Letty knew and kept to herself, and brooded over along with those other thoughts which lay hidden in the fire she studied so much?

CHAPTER III.

NELLIE.

It was close upon ten o'clock when I was under the portico of Nettlewood House. I might have turned and gone home, preferring a more rational hour for visiting next day, had I not promised my wife to call upon Ellen that night. Besides, Ellen was alone, and I was anxious to see her without a witness—see her as my sister, not as Herbert Vaughan's wife.

Janet admitted me into the hall, and flung up her arms at recognizing me.

"The young Measter Gear!" she cried; "ye're welcome—she'll be glad to see ye here."

"Did not you expect me, Janet?"

"Na—does she?"

"I believe so. A letter was left for me at the 'Ferry Inn.'"

"She's a lady that does na talk muckle to her sarvants, or trust in 'em muckle," said Janet, in a husky whisper; "this stranger's mair bold, mair able to tak her ain part here against—against the things that haunt a hoose sic as this. It dinna matter to sic as me," she said thoughtfully, "I canna expect to win upon the luvie o' the stranger, can I?"

"I believe you will, Janet."

"I ha'e gaen up tryin'," said she wearily; "but the young meestress—my dear young meestress that war? Say she's weal and bricht, as her young life desarved."

"She is. You will be surprised to see how much she has altered for the better."

"I knew the lassie wud. Where be she, sir?"

"At the 'Ferry Inn.'"

"I'll gang and see her the nicht, if the new meestress will allow me," said Janet; "mayhap ye'll stay an hoor here?"

"It is more than likely."

"She's all alane. The master—Lord bless him—will be hame the morrow. Well, what do *ye* want?"

This was addressed to James Baines, whose pock-marked countenance loomed ominously at us from round a pillar.

"I thought the door had not been answered," he grumbled. "Oh!" catching sight of me, "good evening to you, sir, I hope your honour is well."

"Quite well, thank you."

"Ye can gae noo, James, and be thankfu' for the gude news ye've heard," said Janet, just a trifle sarcastic; this wa', Mr. Gear. I'll show ye to Mrs. Vaughan."

Along the corridor, preceded by Janet, as in the old days when my love was unavowed, and my heart thrilled at the solitariness of the widow's life. Did I ever think then of threading those passages in search of Ellen?

"Hark!" said Janet, holding up one hand for me to pause, "that be na like the auld times, Measter Gear."

Some dance-music dashed off on the piano welled into the passages and filled the place with harmony—even then the music was not inspiring, and the far-away echoes that it roused sounded in the distance like vain murmuring.

"Music dinna agree vera weel with the auld hoose," said Janet, as though a similar impression had struck her; "it's oot o' place a bit. I like the solemn music frae *her*—it seems mair natural. That's it!"

With a suddenness that was a little startling, the dance-music drifted away into a Requiem of Mozart's—a favourite piece of Ellen's before her marriage lines were written.

"*She* war a gude player, too afore she last a' heart for play here," said Janet, "but yer sister is better, and keeps at it weel when he's awa'."

"Is he often away?"

"Na—na," she said quickly, put upon her guard by my inquiry, "not sae often as in the auld days—ony when compelled by beesiness."

She turned the handle of the door, and announced me. I entered. Ellen rose from the piano, and clasped me in her arms.

"My dear Canute, I am so glad to see you!"

The first warmth of her greeting ended, she asked me several questions about her mother and my wife—their health and peace of mind, &c.—when she detected Janet still standing at the door.

"You can go, Janet," she said quickly.

"I am waitin' to ask ye a favour, Mistress Vaughan."

"Well—what is it?"

"My young mistress that war is at the Ferry Inn—will ye spare me for an hoor to see her, please?"

"You may go to-morrow."

"To-morrow the master wull be back, and may want me."

"Ah! I had forgotten—the master must not find you missing from your post. Yes—you can go now."

Janet thanked her, and retired. Ellen looked up at me, and laughed.

"And if you never come back again," addressing the door which had closed on Janet, "it will not be Meestress Vaughan," imitating Janet's hard accent, "that will break her heart."

"Do you not like Janet?" I asked.

"I never like people whose ways are incomprehensible to me, and

who are officious in intruding when you have a wish to be alone," said Ellen; "no," after a moment's reflection, "I don't like her at all."

"Judging from the past affection between my wife and her, I should have fancied that Janet would have constituted herself quite a humble friend of yours by this time."

"Mary understood her—I can't make her out. Sometimes I feel as if I were treating her harshly and subjecting her to much unnecessary snubbing—at other times I feel as if she were a spy upon my actions, a tale-bearer of every trivial thing I do or say. But Janet is not worth wasting time about. Sit here and tell me of home—the new home where mother is!"

I took the chair indicated, and spoke of home-matters as required—of the mother's cottage near our own, and the good tidings of the willow's new lease of life in Cumberland soil. For a moment, she dashed her white hand across her eyes, and said,

"That will do, Canute. That's all a reproach to me."

"What is?"

"That lonely life of the dear mother from whom I fled, in my rash haste to come here."

I saw her little foot rise and fall impetuously upon the carpet; I noted the heaving of the bosom of her dress, the false glitter of her eyes; in the handsome face, radiant with health as it was, I felt my heart sink to note a faint reflex of Mary Zitman's looks.

"Ellen you are not happy!" I cried.

"Don't say that—don't think that!" she answered; "did I not marry for love of him, and has he ever shown one sign of his old love for me fading away? I tell you that I am happy—that I shall be always happy here, Canute!"

"I am glad to hear that."

She did not like the tone of my voice, although she affected to disregard it.

"I have been told more than once that your wife's past life here was far from enviable," Ellen said; "though she had her own way, and there was little to thwart it. *That* has perplexed me—and even if the domesticities disturb one at times, it is so easy to sink them to the bottom by a brighter thought. When I feel hipped—just a little hipped—there is always some pleasurable excitement to fly to and carry off the impression. No one shall ever taunt *me* with being an unhappy woman!"

She said it almost defiantly; her manner reminded me of her past assertion to the same effect, when I had first seen her as a wife, but it was more developed now, and—it deceived me less! Poor Ellen! The dream of love had vanished; she, ever a quick observer, had seen further into the depths of Herbert Vaughan's character than either Mary or I—I could have staked my life upon it then. Before her, a long way ahead, lay the steep uphill path of a wife's duty to a

man she had been deceived in—how would she, a woman of spirit, bear up, and how far towards the journey's end? She had been a proud and unflinching girl, ever a strong one, but she must infallibly sink by the way, unless a superhuman hand supported her with the strength of its Divinity.

"I have not time to be depressed here," she said; "when Herbert is away, which is but seldom, I ride out on horseback, or sally forth on a mountain scramble. I was ever a good draftsman, if you remember, Canute. Look here."

On the table lay a little portfolio which she snatched up and opened with a hasty hand, tilting its contents on to the table and floor. There were many pencil sketches of the scenery in the neighbourhood—a few in water colours.

"There, dear old Can," she said, stooping and thrusting into my hand a sketch of Nettlewood Ferry and the "Ferry Inn," "that's where you met your sweetheart for the first time. I have been drawing that expressly for you."

"Thank you, Nell. I shall always treasure it."

"And here—no, not here, for it's there," making a little impetuous dash at a sketch that had fluttered towards the window curtains, "is the Black Gap pass, looking down into Engerdale."

"Have you been there?"

"Several times—it's a favourite haunt of mine when the weather is fine. I know every turn of the route now, and shall set up as guide when all other professions are vain and unprofitable. Do you remember that old sheepfold between the Black and the White Gap?" she said, pointing to it on the drawing; "there it is across the river from the Black Gap side," said Ellen; "it is a ruin now, which the sheep despise even in wet weather. Keep that sketch too, Canute, if you like it."

"Also 'in memoriam,'" I said, confiscating the two drawings of Ellen's.

She had succeeded in turning the subject from the one particular topic calculated to be embarrassing, and, for her sake, I made no effort to retrace the ground and bring her back to it. It could do no good, and it was beyond my power, scarcely my place, to follow to the end the little mystery which made all lives with Herbert Vaughan unsettled. We spoke of the good folk at Nettlewood—of the Rays, whom she professed to like, because their eccentricities amused her—of Mr. Wenford, who came so often to the House now he was her husband's partner, and who also amused her in a different fashion, she said.

"He's an odd man, but his oddities are worth studying," said Ellen; "and it is so easy to rouse him to a fury which is more amusing than his oddities. The days would pass more duller here, if it were not for poor Mad Wenford."

"Poor Mad Wenford, Ellen?"

"I pity him, because he is a good man spoiled," said Ellen; "a

good man, if you will, who has thoroughly degenerated into a bad one. He must have been an amiable fool once—now he prides himself upon a cunning that everybody can see, and a roughness that nobody seems to care for. But he is vastly amusing.”

Ellen laughed in rather a heartless manner, I thought, and as the jest—if there were one—was pointless to me, I fear I returned a very sickly smile by way of response.

“He’s poor Mad Wenford for a second and more literal reason,” said Ellen; “he has gambled and thrown away three-fourths of a fine property, and sunk the rest in a speculation that will ruin more than him.”

“The lead mine!” I ejaculated.

“I fancy so. He comes here and whispers about it long and anxiously with my husband, who is to sink or swim in a venture that I thought was foolish from the first. I told them so; but I was only a woman, whose opinion was not worth considering.”

“And if it come to sinking, Nell?”

“Perhaps Herbert and I will be all the happier, taking a lesson from a certain Mary Zitman of old times. I would give ten years of my life—the next ten, which are a woman’s best, I’ve heard—to see Herbert working on soberly and industriously for his living. He might make a fortune that way—tied by necessity to one pursuit, I believe that he would excel in it. Busied in a hundred schemes to raise himself to greatness, he will collapse, unless the tide turn very suddenly and swiftly in his favour. I see the wisdom in him of which he is so vain, but I see the weakness that has been the ruin of nobler and better men.”

“What weakness is that?” said a voice close to our ears.

We both started as though we had been two conspirators plotting against the life of him who had suddenly stolen in upon us.

Vaughan laughed at our surprise, and held his hand towards me.

“Mr. Gear, I hope that I am not intruding upon any outburst of confidence on the part of Mrs. Vaughan.”

“No, sir,” said Ellen, answering for me with her old readiness of reply, “we were simply discussing the merits of Mr. Herbert Vaughan.”

“And his reigning weakness—what was that?”

“The weakness of sinking *all and everything*,” what an emphasis marked those words! “in a struggle to be rich.”

“I always valued riches, Ellen—I have a great respect for them still, and the power they place in a man’s hands. Mr. Gear remembers that we were nearly declaring war to the knife, when he stole my sister’s wealth away without enriching himself. I scarcely know if I ever loved him since.”

There was a steely glitter in his eyes I did not like—the mocking words upon his lip might have met with a retort from me had I not

seen the pained expression on Ellen's flushed face. In her eyes I read a wish that I should go at once, and I had no desire to linger there. Every time I met that man I felt towards him a greater antipathy—the gulf between us and our natures was widening every day, and no new ties of relationship could bridge it over. I distrusted him, and he read that distrust in my face more plainly each time we crossed each other's path.

I rose to go.

"I fear that I have left Mary too much alone to-night," I said.

He did not press me to stay, did not express any surprise to hear that his sister was in Nettlewood, or favour me by an inquiry respecting her health. There was a heaviness in his looks that betokened he had been crossed to-night, that he had met with ill-luck somewhere on his journey, and had brought its shadow back with him. Such feelings I knew he had the power to mask when it pleased him—as he had the power of the snake-charmer to lure and ensnare—but he did not care to disguise them on the night of his sudden return.

"You are going, Gear?" he said.

"Yes. Good night, Nellie."

"Good night. I shall see you again shortly—in so limited a world we *must* meet."

"Unless there is an interdict on meeting, which," he added, as Ellen's face flushed a deeper crimson than before, "there is not, in this case. I am always proud to see Mr. Gear—he honours this unhappy house by his presence."

These last words were uttered as the door closed or slammed behind us, and were unheard by Ellen.

"Unhappy—unhappy," I repeated twice.

"Where is the happiness here?" he said.

"In your wife, I trust."

"Put not your trust in wives," said he, scornfully; "they will fail you—they will deceive you—they will dishonour you and yours."

"What do you mean?—what do you want me to suspect?" I cried, turning upon him angrily in my turn; "man, speak out, and drop this forced air of mystery, which becomes you so ill! Have you no trust in your wife—my sister?"

"Have they been talking about her in Nettlewood yet?" he asked; "have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing, sir!"

"Perhaps I am the slave of an illusion," he said, moodily; "perhaps my misfortunes are softening my brain a little. I make no charge—I withdraw my remarks concerning her—I am vexed, and not myself to-night. Mr. Gear," offering me his hand, "forgive and forget this folly."

I took the hand so proffered, and he wrung it in his own a

moment. Was all this acting, or was it a frank confession? I could not tell by looking into a face that expressed only what its owner wished—but still I was beset with the fancy that all this was but acting, for a purpose which in the mists around it was not easily distinguishable.

"I will try and consider it a folly—nothing more. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Gear."

Before the door closed, I heard the piano sounding faintly from the distant drawing-room. Ellen was playing the dance-music again—mad waltz music, that, in the distance, sounded, to my awakened sense of fear, like a desperate attempt to beat off evil thoughts—a poor bravado that deceived no one save herself.

The door did not close—from the threshold of his home Mr. Vaughan watched my departure, and perhaps sent his curses after me. I felt as though weighed down by some such evil influence as I returned to the Ferry Inn.



CHAPTER IV.

JOSEPH'S CONFESSION.

I NEED not dwell upon each day's events at Nettlewood. Fragments of a mystery floated about my path, and confused me in a vain attempt to mould them into some semblance of fact. That there was a something here, as in the early days, I was assured—that all was no more right at the great house now than then. It might be a new secret, or a part of the old, and either there was no guessing at.

My wife, who read my doubts, and whom I could not pain by constant recapitulation of a subject that unnerved her, had said, on my return that night chronicled in the preceding chapter,

"I knew that he would not make her happy—that I did not distrust or fear him in vain;" but her distrust and fear resolved themselves into generalities when I sought to gain the clue to the troubles Ellen boldly fought against. They lived in mystery at Nettlewood—its enervating atmosphere wearied and worried me. Letty Ray was as mysterious as Herbert Vaughan or Ellen—Janet, the grim servant-maid, was as impenetrable as granite, and one woman saw merit in her

which another condemned and repelled—all around me was thickening, and I was merged in it and become lost in it. New suspicions met me at every turn—it would be better to escape them all—there would be quieter days at Borrowdale! But the quiet days were over with me—I had left them behind for ever, when the Nettlewood ferry boat bore me to the old field of action. In the whirl of events hurrying on towards me, there was no escape for me or mine!

Work had begun at Mrs. Ray's—the workmen had been mustered by my partner at Keswick, and sent over the Black Gap to me. Henlock was full of labourers again—the drawing-room alterations of the mansion were rapidly progressing. I met Herbert Vaughan about Nettlewood; I met his partner, Mr. Wenford, a moody heavy-brained man now, whose "madness" had taken a sullen turn, from which he seldom deviated, and whose politeness to me was not particularly apparent. I was puzzled by my brother Joseph's prolonged stay at the Inn, by the friendship he appeared to have formed with my sister Ellen's husband; I was cheered alone by my wife's presence and love—and felt that it was a happy thought which had induced her to accompany me.

Ellen I saw frequently. She sought my wife out—took her for long mountain rambles—for long drives in her carriage—induced her, somewhat reluctantly, to pay Nettlewood House a visit once or twice. But Ellen was not precise in her movements—she had been ever of an impulsive disposition. The second week of our sojourn in the Vale, Ellen's visits—her taste for my wife's society, suddenly ceased, and Mr. Vaughan accounted for it to his sister by saying that she had taken offence at something Mary had said—he did not know what—woman's "tiffs" he had no time to study. Then Ellen appeared again—always with the affection of being free from care, and evaded all explanation—finally she surprised all of us, her husband included, by disappearing for a whole day, and returning in the twilight across the ferry.

"Canute," she said to me, who was the first to meet her, "I have crossed the Gaps to Borrowdale, and seen mother. I was urged onward to see her, and nothing could stop me—I have been an ungrateful child to her, and I yearned for her forgiveness. It has been a fine day, and I have escaped all the mists."

Herbert Vaughan had been scouring the place in search of her, and came up at this juncture on horseback.

"Where have you been, madam?" he asked, imperiously.

Ellen looked at him fixedly, and told the same story of her wanderings.

"It is sixteen miles there and back across the Gaps, and no woman could have borne the fatigue," he said.

"Do you think I would lie to you, sir?" cried Ellen, for the first time since her marriage losing her temper in my presence.

"I think that this requires searching into," he said; "and I will not rest until I have sifted it to the bottom."

"You forget yourself, Mr. Vaughan," said Ellen; "you forget there are witnesses here, before whom I have a right to be spared this humiliation."

"You have no right to leave your home!" he cried, furious with passion.

"Sir, I am your wife, not your prisoner."

"I will not have it!—from this time forth, I will not have it!"

He lashed his mare with his whip, and she curveted and pranced upon the sloping bank leading to the Ferry.

"*Home!*" he said, in a menacing tone, before he rode away.

"I am glad that you did not interfere," said Ellen, turning to me as soon as he had gone; "it was the wiser and the better course. There has been misfortune at the lead mine to-day—a strike of the miners for wages. This is an unusual storm—think no more of it."

"Will you return at once, now that his passion is so violent? Shall I return with you?"

"Do you think I fear him?" cried Ellen, proudly; "no, let me go alone, and at once. I obey his will—when I can ascertain what it is. Good-bye, Canute. He is not so angry as he seems, I think. It is—" her red lip betrayed itself in spite of her—"a habit at times, that verges on the histrionic. This is a little storm—to-morrow we shall have sunny weather."

And on the morrow, sure enough, Herbert Vaughan and his wife took a long ride together, with James Baines officiating as groom in the rear. There was fair weather then for days together—a break in the clouds ere they closed again.

During the progress of the alterations, I found suddenly a difficulty in getting rid of the brotherly attention of Joseph, who was interested in all improvements on the estate. He made a point of accompanying me at last every morning, and of intently studying my theory of supervision. He even stooped to flatter me, and to express his surprise at my wonderful "comprehensive abilities in matters of detail," whatever he might mean by that. Here we met Mrs. Ray very frequently, whose interest in the alterations was much greater than anybody else's.

Joseph Gear was fond of suggesting alterations when Mrs. Ray was present—his spare body danced attendance after that lady through the grounds; he was even courteous enough to offer her his arm, and relieve John of his escort—once even slipped a piece of silver into the hands of John, who from that time forth revered my brother, and seemed to comprehend his wishes perfectly.

"I don't know what I should do, if it were not for your brother," said Mrs. Ray to me in Joseph's presence—in fact when she was leaning on Joseph's arm, "he's so handy to hold on by; he's allus kind and attentive, and the gentlest of creaturs. I'm afeard I trouble him very much."

"Not by any means, my dear Mrs. Ray," said Joseph, quite briskly.

The particular morning in which these flying compliments occurred was a damp and showery one, but Mrs. Ray had appeared in defiance of opposing elements when she had become aware of Joseph's propinquity. In plain language, either Mrs. Ray appeared to be "settling her cap" at Joseph, or Joseph was paying Mrs. Ray an undue amount of attention—I began almost to fear that there was some little understanding between this old woman and this middle-aged man. It was an unnatural match, and showed to what strange worship a man, led by his greed for money, might reduce himself; and from that morning I resolved to have a little talk with Joseph at the very first opportunity.

Things were proceeding too far, when John took his departure as a matter of course, and left Joseph with Mrs. Ray, a silk umbrella of Brobignagian proportions, a work-bag containing some extraordinary knitting in which Mrs. Ray indulged, and one muddy golosh on his little finger—said golosh refusing to keep on, on any pretence whatever.

"I'm afeard," continued Mrs. Ray, "that he's too kind on my account, and that it interferes with the business he has down here."

"Down here for health's sake, Mrs. Ray—solely in hope of finding some distraction for a great loss," answered Joseph, heaving a deep sigh by way of conclusion.

"Ah! you must have been very fond of Mrs. G. to feel it so much," remarked Mrs. Ray, with a dryness that made me smile, though it only increased the downward curves of my brother Joseph's mouth; "you were very much attached to her?"

"Yes, I were, madam," said Joseph, in his confusion and re-awakened grief.

"Was she very fond of you, sir?"

"Very. I did my best to make her happy—that was only my duty, Mrs. Ray."

"Some people don't care about dooty much," was the short answer; "some people—hold up, sir—I was allus weak on my left side."

"I beg pardon," said Joseph.

"Some people talk a good deal about dooty, but don't know what it means," continued Mrs. Ray; "does it rain now, Mr. Gear?"

"I—I don't think it does."

"Then I'd put the umbereller down—it'd save worriting my feathers a good deal. Are you fond of flowers, Mr. Gear?"

"Passionately, madam."

"Ah! I ain't," said Mrs. Ray, "ony my daughter is. When she can get away from her guvness to do a bit of gardenin' she will. I think we'll go and look her up."

"Ye-es, ma'am, with great pleasure—ahem!"

Poor Joseph was led away in a direction he particularly objected to--the searching eyes of Letty Ray were too much for him, and saw through the shallow game he was playing too accurately to please him. He knew it annoyed Letty to see him enact the part of escort to Mrs. Ray, and Mrs. Ray, who was in an aggravating mood, knew that also, and hence was inclined to show off my brother that morning.

This odd couple had not left me many minutes before Letty Ray, with a rich shawl looped over her head, looking like the same Letty Ray I had seen at the Ferry the first time I entered Nettlewood, came rapidly towards me.

"Mr. Gear," she said, "I wish to speak to you."

I drew a little apart with her, and she commenced at once in an excited tone.

"I spoke of your brother when you came back about these alterations," she said, imperiously; "I believe I did not impress you with *my* love for him. Shall I tell him what I think of coming here in search of money--no matter by what ends--or will you?"

"You are perfectly at liberty to address him on the subject, Miss Ray."

"I will not have it!" she cried, stamping her foot impatiently upon the ground; "this man comes to rob me for that which I almost hate myself at times, but which shall never benefit him, I swear. This man with no soul, with no common decency, I will balk at the hazard of my birth-right, if you do not warn him to stay away from here."

"Is he bound to take my warning?" I inquired; "do you think for an instant that I have any influence over him?"

"Then it must be left to me. I will seek him out at once."

She was turning passionately away, when I entreated her attention for one moment. I told her that I had intended to talk calmly on the subject with my brother, and begged for her own sake that she would allow me to reason with him first. I also added that it was more than probable that we were both in the dark as to the intentions of Mrs. Ray, who was a far-seeing woman, and not likely to be deceived by any false pretensions.

"She would marry to-morrow to spite me, if I offended her," cried Letty; "do not build on any rational step that she might take. She has never loved me--we have been never mother and daughter to each other."

"Perhaps there are faults on both sides--in the Ferry Inn times I thought so."

"Did you?" she said eagerly; "and my fault--what was it?"

"The shutting up yourself--your true self--from the mother; offering no love, seeking no love from her--in your greatest trouble holding her ever from your heart."

"True enough," she said, gloomily looking down at her feet; "who would have thought a stranger could have guessed it all so

well? But oh! sir, what a different girl I should have been, if she had been a different mother to me!"

She dashed hurriedly away in the direction of the house. By that step I could see that she left me to adopt my own course with Joseph Gear.

And that course?—how could it possibly avail? On the life and purposes of my brother had I, after all, a right to intrude? He was his own master, and able to judge of what was best, or most profitable for him. Still, this scheming annoyed me; this covetous grasping which he involuntarily betrayed appeared to shame me as well as him; I would at least make one effort to stay it.

Joseph Gear was certainly a mean man. More than once in the course of this story that fact has been pretty plainly exemplified. He had not begun life in a mean spirit, but the first misfortune in business appeared to have narrowed his mind, and a wife of a saving disposition had not improved it. Evidences of his "closeness" had cropped out with every step he made towards independence; he had become miserly, and, as a natural result, he had become wretched and discontented. Gold was his god, and he worshipped nothing else. Before his idol he sacrificed all home affection, all love for kith and kin; further and further away from his heart we had drifted for years—it was only by a wrench of something nobler in his disposition, something that was rapidly failing him, that he approached us at uncertain intervals, and showed that we had not utterly sunk out of his best memories.

He was no favourite with my wife, whose spirit rejected anything that was covetous; even at the Ferry Inn, the ruling passion had shown itself too plainly. For economy's sake, he was living with Jabez at the back of the house; for economy's sake, he was always studying my dinner and tea hour, and hanging about the doors for an invitation; in the hope of saving a little, even in Nettlewood, he denied himself almost the common necessities of life.

Returning to the Ferry Inn, I met Mary, with a face paler than usual. It was easy to see that something had happened in my absence—I had not studied those tell-tale looks so long, that I could not read the slightest evidence of trouble on them.

"What has happened, Mary?"

"Nothing to me at least, dear," she said, "but they are quarrelling at the Inn, and I was glad to escape from it."

"Who is quarrelling?"

"Your brother and mine."

"Vaughan there!"

"He came on purpose to see your brother, and they were at high words almost directly."

"Joseph at high words is something out of the common. Surely it cannot be about Ellen, who was his favourite if he ever had one."

"No, no—it is about the Rays, I think. I have heard the name mentioned once or twice."

"Singular," I remarked; "what have the Ray's to do with Herbert Vaughan?"

We reached the Inn. The window of the tap-room was down, and the voices, still pitched to a high key, welled forth thence.

"I say again, what business is it of yours?" I heard my brother, exclaim, in that shrill falsetto which accompanied all excitement on his part.

"I claim it as my business at least, and I will not have it!" answered Vaughan.

"I have not owned to it—I defy you to prove it, man."

"Still I warn you—take care!"

We entered the house at the same moment as Herbert Vaughan opened the tap-room door.

"Here is your brother, Canute," he said, pausing and looking back into the room, "shall I ask his advice upon the subject?"

"If you like," was the dogged answer.

Joseph Gear was at bay, it seemed.

"Leave them to their quarrel, dear," said my wife to me; "this cannot concern you."

"On the contrary, if this gentleman here do not take my warning, it will concern Canute Gear most of all."

I heard my brother groan within. Here was another hateful string of allusions to irritate me from this man, who seemed ever working in the dark. I resolved to dash this down at once. Whispering Mary to retire to her room, I passed into the tap-room, almost pushing Herbert Vaughan before me.

In a corner of this low-ceilinged, smoke-begrimed apartment, my brother was seated amongst the narrow tables and forms placed there for the use of Cumberland workmen. He sat with his head against the wall, and his eyes fixed on his tormentor; he had plucked up a strange spirit to defy him.

"Brother," I said, advancing to him, "that which concerns me, I have a right to know. If you can trust him, surely you can place confidence in me?"

He looked eagerly towards me—he half rose to grasp my hand, and then sat down again.

"Some day," he murmured—"some day perhaps."

"Shall I explain to my brother-in-law?" asked Vaughan, coolly.

"You will go now if you are a man," said Joseph; "I am fairly beaten—I own it. What more do you want?"

"Nothing more. It is a fair confession, which I accept," he said. He turned to me.

"Mr. Gear, this is a trifling dispute between your brother and me, and ends, as it ought to do, amicably. Will you both come to Nettlewood House this evening, and show to Ellen, who doubts the fact, that there is true friendship existent in the midst of us?"

"Not to-night," feebly responded Joseph.

"In a night or two, then, when the ruffled stream has subsided again. Mary is well, I hope, Gear?"

"Very well."

"My love to her. Good day."

He left the room and went out of the house. Joseph rose from his seat, watched him from the tap-room window, till he was fairly out of sight; watched him eagerly with his hands clutching the window frames.

"He's gone," he said, turning round to me; "he's gone for good. What a terrible man he is!"

He dropped into the chair beneath the window, and began rubbing up his short grey hairs with his hands that trembled very much. I took a chair before the beer-stained table that divided us, and faced him.

"Does it concern Nellie?"

"No."

"Nor me?"

"Wait a moment—part of it does, part of it doesn't. Don't ask me to explain just now. There is a day coming when I can tell you more."

"I ask you to tell me now," I said, firmly; "I have grown so tired of grouping in the dark, that I am resolved to charge ruthlessly at all new mysteries. You are in this man's power?"

"He owes me ten thousand pounds—does it seem like it?"

"Owes you ten thousand pounds!"

"On his personal security, unfortunately," sighed Joseph, "and I don't believe he's worth ten thousand pence. There will come a day when I will ruin that man."

His hand clutched the edge of the table, which shook beneath the force with which he gripped it. If the time ever came that would be a relentless hold on Herbert Vaughan, I thought.

"And the debtor has the upper hand of the creditor, and holds him down, and threatens him? What does that mean?"

"I dearn't tell you—I haven't confidence enough in you to tell you that," he whispered, huskily.

"And yet that man——"

"That man found it out years ago."

I held my hand across the table towards him.

"Trust in me, Joseph—I will not abuse your confidence. If the secret affects me, trust me the more, and ask my advice to extricate you from the net which this man spreads on all sides, and includes all. Remember we are children of one mother, and that in our common trouble we should band together and fight it down."

"If I might trust you, if I might shake off the weight upon my soul," he said, affected by my warm appeal.

"If you have done wrong—which I fear you have—and it requires my help to set you right, ask for it and I will give it you. If my

pardon be required—I am getting near the truth, I see—trust in the younger brother's warmth of heart to say, thy sins be forgiven thee."

He seized my hand at once.

"I will tell all," he said—"I will hold you to your word. I shall be free of that man who has haunted me so long, and nearer that revenge I prom—"

"We will not talk of revenge just now," I interrupted, sternly.

Joseph released my hand and closed the windows—went to the door and turned the key—took his place close to my side.

"You will hate me ever after this, Canute," he murmured in a low voice, "but better your hate than that man's tyranny. I place myself in your power—but I trust in you. You remember the bankruptcy which ruined the firm?"

"Why should I forget it?"

"It was a sham bankruptcy, carefully prepared beforehand to shake off all the ties that kept me down, and all the family claims upon me. I was getting on too slowly, too much money was paid annually to mother and the rest, and I—I broke."

"My God!" I ejaculated, recoiling from him in my horror, "so bad as this!—so awfully and atrociously bad!"

Joseph edged his chair after me. A more abject picture than that man presented at that moment I never hope to see again.

"You promised me your pardon, you promised to give me your advice," he entreated; "you won't—my own brother!—turn against me now you have drawn the secret from me."

"No," I answered.

"After it had gone too far I was sorry—my solicitor, Vaughan's father, saw first through the maze of complication, but aided me at last in the deception. We worked together, and deceived the world. I was declared bankrupt—the estate paid its few shillings in the pound, and I was free to begin again. You know what followed; I got rich, I saved money, I worked my way upwards until this man—Vaughan's son—came to life to ruin me."

"Ruin?"

"Ruined—only a few hundred pounds left me in the whole world, I swear to you. This man, Vaughan, in grouping over his father's papers, had discovered the secret, and saw the clue to preying on me. I have been in his power ever since—he borrowed money which I dared not claim again—he extorted from me ten thousand pounds on Ellen's wedding day, her portion, that he said was legally her own, but which he promised to repay me from his sister's fortune. You know how you balked me by the marriage, and can guess the good turn which I meant that you should do me, and which we talked over in Knight Ryder Street. And now see how it has all ended—to what I am reduced at last!"

His nervous hands wandered one over the other. His regret was more for the money he had lost, than the awful crime he had perpetrated.

I could see it even in the early time of that avowal. Something in my looks warned him of the opinion I had formed, for he added eagerly:

"Don't think that I ever forgot you—that some day I didn't mean to give back all the money. In my will I have left every farthing of my property to you—whatever money I may die possessed of will become the family's—it shall never leave the Gears."

"Vaughan threatens you, at times, with disclosing all to me, and to other creditors, likely to be less lenient?"

"That's it!—that's it!" said he, "but the other creditors are scattered, and dead, buried, or gone abroad. It was only you whom I feared. There was something behind your good temper, your patience, very hard and inflexible, and I dreaded it."

"Dread it no longer," I said, "but try to ask God to forgive you, as I do, all the past bitter wrong engendered by a foul cupidity. Why, I don't believe you are really sorry for all this wrong done yet."

"I am—indeed I am!" he whined.

"Well, I will keep your secret—more, I will ask you to keep it from one faithful heart, which gives the eldest born the first place there. We will not shadow her whole after-life by dealing such a blow to all her pride in you."

"Certainly not," said my brother, with alacrity.

She has praised your shrewdness all her life," I said.

He winced at this—but it was a homethrust that might do him good, and I did not spare him much.

"And now to change the subject that is very painful, tell me why Vaughan and you quarrelled to-day?"

He hesitated for an instant.

"Go on—we need have no secrets about this, I think."

"He thinks I am—I am just a little too attentive to Mrs. Ray," Joseph confessed.

"Do those attentions affect him?"

"I don't see how—but they do," said my brother; "I should have thought that if I were lucky enough to secure Mrs. Ray, it would have been better for his own chances of extorting money from me."

"No matter—he objects?"

"Yes."

"And these attentions you confess to?"

The hand that was passing over his furrowed forehead paused. He glanced askance at me.

"To a certain extent they are attentions—but they are not taken offence at by Mrs. Ray, and who else has a right to complain?"

"Many, I think. And now, Joseph, the last question of all—Do you intend to ask Mrs. Ray to marry you?"

"Why should I not?" he rejoined.

"It is an unnatural union—it is a mockery of marriage, against which every honest soul protests."

"Canute," he said, in a low excited whisper, "it is saving me—the whole family from ruin. It is a princely fortune and in careful hands might be doubled. It is only hampered by a feeble woman, who, please God, can't live very long. See the chances of a man rising in life, and ask him if he can give them all up for the sake of what a few sentimental beings may say of him."

"I warn you that you are on dangerous ground—that only harm can follow this intention. I believe that there is no real penitence in you for the past guilt, if you continue to prosecute this scheme."

"It is worth the risk of danger, or of being misunderstood," he said. "If I marry Mrs. Ray, Canute, you shall see how wrongly you have judged me. You, at least, will not interfere with my hopes?"

"I have no right."

"You are the only one to whom I have confessed my intention," he said; "to Vaughan I have denied it."

"Will the falsehood avail you much? Is not the truth suspected by Mrs. Ray—more than suspected by her daughter?"

"She is a child," said my brother contemptuously; "a wilful passionate child, whose folly her mother laughs at."

"Well, well," I said, tired of the subject, "before you is a labyrinth, and you are your own master. I have expressed my opinion on your plans, and now have done with them."

"You are too ideal," said Joseph; "you do not look at life with my eyes."

"Thank God, no?"

"You will not betray me?" he said, alarmed at my outburst; "you will remember that you have forgiven all the past?"

"I will remember."

"If I ever become rich again, I will pay you to the uttermost farthing, Canute," he whined.

I did not reply to this—I was glad to unlock the door and escape from the room. Joseph Gear had lost *caste* with me—all the sordidness of his nature had betrayed itself that night, and its awful depths revolted me. His estimate of right and wrong, his disregard of every social law when it stood between him and his lust for money, bewildered me and stunned me.

I left him sitting there, pondering over all that he had confessed, and perhaps regretting the revelation, and went into the best room to think of it after my own fashion.

Thinking thus, when an arm stole round my neck and a fair face was pressed against my own.

"You are very serious to-night," said Mary; "this is not my Canute, whose good temper, patience, love, make home so bright a place."

"I have lost faith in one I loved," I said, bitterly; "in the brother I have been taught to look up to and reverence."

"And it disheartens you?"

"Yes—naturally."

"You, a strong man, will understand what a poor weak woman has suffered, then," said she; "when all that she was taught to reverence betrayed itself and was set to work against her. But you, dear Canute, will not give way?—that is not in *your* nature."

"No, no—there is nothing to give way at, Mary. I am only startled at the little knowledge we may possess of those we love—at the awful secrets which may have effected all their lives and yet are hidden from us."

"Sometimes in charity—and even in mercy hidden by those who struggle on for love of us—say sometimes that, Canute?"

"Sometimes, perhaps."

"There are secrets of others which we dare not acknowledge—your brother's was his own."

"Yes."

"You have forgiven him?"

"Yes—why should I bear him malice?"

"Yours is ever a noble nature, husband—God be thanked that every day I understand it better, and value it and the blessing it brings the more."

"Ever a flatterer, Mary. Put on your bonnet and let us stroll by the Ferry banks till the stars come out. This has disturbed you, and we must not have you looking pale again."

CHAPTER V.

MRS. RAY'S HOUSE-WARMING.

DURING the progress of the alterations, I found time to visit Borrowdale nearly once a week. Mr. Sanderson was busy, and occasionally required my services at home. Mrs. Ray objected to these fittings, it may be said here—she flattered me by her opinion that the work never progressed satisfactorily unless I was by to superintend it. Her anxiety to get the drawing-room finished was intense; her usual complaint, that old as she was, she could not afford to lose

time, occurred very frequently at this juncture. In July the room was finished and decorated, and the library and eastern room making rapid progress. In July, Mrs. Ray issued her invitations.

"You and your wife have promised to come," she said to me; "I want all my friends to see what a fine house I've got—what a crowd of decent people I can bring to it. I 'spose it'll cost a heap of money?"

"There is not much doubt of that, Mrs. Ray," I said, hoping her natural prudence might lead her to reflect upon the matter at the eleventh hour.

"I don't mind money for this once—Letty's coming out, and I hope will marry a gentleman. Why shouldn't she?"

I did not see any reason why she should not.

"She's only got a fiery temper—some gen'lemen like spitfires, or they wouldn't marry 'em so often. I should like to see Letty married comfortably," said the mother, with a touch of maternal solicitude in the hard dry voice.

"She would be all the happier."

"Everybody's the happier for being married, old or young," said Mrs. Ray, looking at me askance out of the corners of her eyes; "don't you think so?"

"No—I don't."

"Your brother does."

"His opinions are not mine, Mrs. Ray. On many important topics we differ very considerably."

"He's a sharp man—I should say much sharper than you are, Mr. Gear."

"I believe he bears that reputation."

"I like a man that looks out sharp—it shows 'cuteness. I like a man who can take care of hisself, don't you.

I answered somewhat irrelevantly, and she added rather sharply,

"And I hate a man that doesn't pay attention when people are talking to 'em. There's not a greater nuisance than talking to a dummy, mind you. Now, lookee here, I want to talk about the expenses of this party. What'll it cost to do the thing in style, Mr. Gear?"

"Sixty or seventy pounds—perhaps more."

"Good lor, so much as that!" gasped the old lady. "Oh! then I'll have one of 'em, just to show the world what I can do if I like. Just to show the world what a mistake it made, when it called me a covetous old woman. Why should I save up money for other people, when I can enjoy life now, Mr. Gear? Who'll thank me when I'm dead?" she cried, fiercely; "not she, at least!"

Letty had entered the room whilst she was speaking, and was the object at which she pointed,

"Thank you for what?"

"For the money I shall leave behind for you to spend."

Letty was in her most sullen mood.

"You'll have no thanks from me."

"Don't be sure you'll get it yet, you hussy," said Mrs. Ray, shaking her index finger at her; "I've a card to play yet, if I like, and I may like, if you vex me. Or I may spend all the money in sixty-pound parties—twice a week. How many years would that last—how many years should I, I wonder?"

I left Mrs. Ray lost in those grave calculations, but found her and her carriage at the Ferry Inn when I went home to dinner. She had surprised my wife by a morning call, and had teased and worried her into accepting her invitation.

Most of Mrs. Ray's invitations were accepted, she told me, with a satisfactory chuckle, two days afterwards.

"They are coming out of curiosity—they are coming out of condescension—the clergyman's coming because he isn't a proud man; and the Justice, because he is, and likes to show himself off in company. It went against the grain to ask Mad Wenford, who allus talks to me as though I kep a public-house still; but I've asked him, too. They say the lead mine's tamed him very much—so bless the lead mine!"

"Has Mr. Vaughan accepted, may I ask?"

"Oh! yes—long ago. Mr. Vaughan and I are getting on very well now—we forgets and forgives, like Christian folk. Do you remember you and I, arm in arm, watching him come across the Ferry once?"

"Well?"

"And what I said?"

"Well?" I repeated.

"I said he was coming at us like a Fate—he's been an uncommon nice fate to me. He made his sister's life a misery, and she flew into your arms, and lost the money. He!—he!—and lost the money!"

The old lady nearly choked herself laughing at the force of circumstances that had raised her to greatness—my brother making his appearance at this moment to inquire after her health afforded me a pretext to escape, and a chance to him of participating in the jest.

The house-warming took place on the night of the 20th of July. I dwell upon it here for the signs of an old story that came to light there, and startled me—for the signs of a new story that evolved thence. The guests were many, and their reception not a bad one. Mrs. Ray had hired from London a master of the ceremonies, as she had hired the Quadrille band. Her daughter and governess did the honours of the reception—the old lady, clad in amber brocade, sat in the corner of the room and enjoyed herself. She even had the good sense to say very little, and to bow and smile rather than talk to those who offered her their congratulations at coming into the family property. When my wife and I entered the room, at a very late hour, for we were anxious to abridge our visit in one way or another—she beckoned us towards her.

"How do you think it all looks?" she whispered.

We thought that it all looked very well, and very grand.

"They're playing at cards in another room, if you like cards. They're dancing here, if you like dancing. I'm sitting still and looking on—it was the gal's advice."

"Letty's?"

"Ah!—have you seen her? She's a wonder, if ever there was one. She's like a princess, and carries it off grand. Proud am I of her, for the first time in my life—a real lady! a real lady!"

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Somewhere about," said the mother; "go and look after her, and tell her what a lady she is—it pleases her. And you, Mary Gear—I almost said Zitman, it's so nat'ral—sit down here by an old woman's side, and talk to me as though you bore no malice. After all, it's lonely here for me—the guv-ness taught *me* nothing, and if I open my mouth, they look as if they wanted hard to laugh. Do you mind sitting down?" she reiterated to my wife.

"Mind!—no."

"They'll wonder—some of 'em—why loss of money has brought back the good looks, those who knowed her when she was a lawyer's daughter. And they'll see she bears no malice—that's what *I* want!"

She laid her wrinkled hand upon my wife's.

"No malice, is it?"

"Not the least in the world."

"Not for all the harm I wished you once, and all the harm I tried to do—say No to that?"

"No."

"Sit here awhile and show 'em that, while your husband looks about him. Bring my daughter here, Mr. Gear, for your wife to see. She has a pink silk on, that cost a guinea a yard!"

Through the crowd of visitors—many of whom had come twenty miles to hold revelry together—I pushed my way in search, not of Letty Ray, but of Ellen Vaughan. They were dancing, some of the guests; those who hung about the doors were whispering of the great fortune that had befallen the Rays with an openness and want of breeding common to guests in general. My wife was well known to the majority of the visitors. I was a stranger to those who lived not in the neighbourhood. Mrs. Ray had well counted on the effect likely to be produced by her propinquity to my wife—they were talking of it round about me.

"She bears her losses well—what an earnest fact it is!—how pretty she is looking!"

"What a contrast!" said another.

"Or rather odious comparison," remarked a third.

I passed on into the card-room; through the card-room to other rooms thrown open, and brilliantly lighted. The windows of some of the rooms were open, and I glanced hastily through them as

I passed. Here and there were stray couples from the dancing; beyond these on the terrace, running along the garden side of the house, were other figures wandering. I passed out and looked down the terrace in search of Ellen; the cool night air was welcome after the heated rooms. The promenaders passed me, chiefly in pairs; one of the last to pass was Herbert Vaughan, with Letty Ray upon his arm. I knew her by the colour and the costliness of the silk she wore, before she passed the window, and her striking face was lit up from the glare within. A very handsome but a very agitated countenance it seemed to me; and the voice was far from calm, that reached my ears for a moment as they passed me.

"This is a strange confidence, Mr. Vaughan. Let me have no more of it."

"Whom have I to confide in, Letty?" Vaughan answered.

"Any one but me," she said; "anyone better than me!"

They were past me, and I went back into the room to wonder at this friendliness—to see danger in it to this low-born heiress. Returning towards the drawing-room, a hand was pressed upon my arm.

"Are you in search of me, Canute? I have Mrs. Ray's word for it."

"Yes, I am in search of you, Nellie."

"This is a change from Nettlewood, something to think of for a day or two afterwards, and so a welcome change. Have you seen my husband?"

"A moment or two since."

"With Miss Ray?" she inquired.

"Yes. I believe with Miss Ray."

She laughed, but I missed the musical ring in her merriment. It was a forced laugh, however well disguised.

"They are great friends. I believe if I were to die—which I am not going to do if I can help it—Herbert would marry Letty Ray. What a temptation to put a little arsenic in my tea, Canute!"

"This is grim jesting, Ellen," I said, gravely; "I don't like it."

"One must jest at something, Canute—one must seek excitement, or die of monotony in Nettlewood. And I tell you, I won't die!"

"Again."

"Where's Mr. Wenford?—have you seen him?"

"Not this evening."

"He was here early; he is my *preux chevalier*, to hold my fan and bouquet, to flirt with, for the sake of a change or of excitement, Canute—eh?"

I looked at her. She *was* excited that evening; her cheeks were flushed; her dark eyes flashed upon me; when she turned her face towards me, there was a furrow across her white forehead that I had seen before. Her whole manner was new, but of a newness that made my heart sink.

"I must tease Letty to-night, also—that will be an old sensation,

that pleases me little. I like to rouse that handsome lioness, and see the fire in her annihilating glances. Ah! here is Mr. Wenford!"

He came up as she spoke. I thought of Mrs. Ray's remark, that the lead mine had tamed him a great deal—he looked so grave before he recognised us. Then his old manner flamed up at once.

"Good evening Mr. Gear. You come to this old woman's kick-up with the rest of us. What an hideous old witch she looks in amber, to be sure!"

"Hush! they will hear you," said Ellen.

"Oh! they have all been saying the same thing, he said, carelessly; "I have never been a man to study my words. Is not that true, Gear?"

"True enough, Mr. Wenford."

"Not but what I have been striving to be a little more polished," he said, laughing; "it's Mrs. Vaughan's wish. She poor mistaken woman, sees the elements of good inherent in me, and, in striving to develop them, I thank her for her interest, and for the improvement of which she has been the cause. I was never fit for woman's society until I knew your sister."

"Shall I make my best curtsy for that compliment?" said Ellen.

"No; make your promise good by dancing the next quadrille with me."

"Willingly."

He offered her his arm, and she left mine to take it.

"I shall see you again," she said to me, and went away. I followed in their wake, and watched them join in the quadrille, and took note of the animated dialogue between the parts. I was perplexed as well as pained to see how friendly Ellen had become with that man—desperate, dangerous, and devoid of principle. If this were her excitement, it were better perhaps to fall into the past life of Mary Zitman, and become the nervous frightened woman I had known her once. And after all, was it an excitement which rendered her one step nearer forgetfulness? I thought not, when suddenly she turned her face away from Wenford, and upon it there settled a stony apathy, that was so akin to despair, that I could have shrieked out "Nellie!" as I watched her.

When the dance was over, Mr. Wenford led Ellen away into the refreshment-room; the stony look had vanished then, and she was bright with smiles. I was proceeding in search of Mary, when Herbert Vaughan met me and shook hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Gear. You are a late visitor."

"I fear I am somewhat late."

"Parties in Cumberland break up at earlier hours than in London the pleasure-seekers having many miles to go. Have you seen my wife?"

"Yes—a few moments back."

"With Mr. Wenford, I suppose?" he added, carelessly.

"Yes—with Mr. Wenford."

"He is an amusing man. Ellen takes a great interest in his eccentricities—I let her have her own way now, Mr. Gear."

"Indeed!"

"She and I have taken some time in judging each other's character—opposite natures, clashing a little at first. But we have got over all that, and are, you will be glad to hear, always the best of friends."

"I am very glad to hear that."

"Certainly we drift our own ways, and adopt the grand policy of non-intervention with each other's pursuits. It is at least more conducive to the serenity of the connubial atmosphere."

"I trust those pursuits do not separate you much?"

"Nothing to speak of—nothing at which either complains," he said. "Where is Mary?"

"With Mrs. Ray, I believe."

"I shall see her presently. What a maze of cross-purposes these evening parties are!"

"Probably."

He seemed inclined to moralize, and loth to part with me for once.

"What a myriad of evil purposes hatching beneath these smiling masks—what plots against one's happiness are being fostered by hearts we should believe in, and friends in whom we have trusted all our lives. Each man's thoughts brooding over his neighbour's shame, and seeking his discomfiture."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing particular—I am speaking generally. Have you studied ancient literature?"

"Not very deeply."

"The novelists of the good old times—men and women who spoke out plainly, and in whose works there were more depth of interest and truer photographs of life? The Behns, Heywoods, Manleys, the Hills, Smolletts, Fieldings, drew life more accurately than the Dickens, Gaskells, Brontes of our own time."

"They might have been truer to life in their day, as the great masters are in ours."

"The great masters are not true—they fear to write the truth, lest the nineteenth century morals should be shocked. Life is the same now as it was in Charles and Queen Anne's time, but society must not be outraged by a fair transcript of it. By all that's solemn, Gear, I believe that life is worse!"

He looked very intently at me—the subject had excited him, and his face betrayed it. His primrose gloved hand pressed my arm hard as he hissed forth, rather than spoke, the last few words.

"I need not say, Vaughan, I don't agree with you. Life is more

pure and delicate, and hence its writers group less for foul specimens."

You don't know life," cried Vaughan; "life's a dream with *you*. When the waking comes, the shock will strike you down."

He turned away, and pondering on the pains he had taken to start so abstract a subject, and the sudden dash of friendliness exhibited, I joined my wife, whom Mrs. Ray was talking quietly to death.

Mary was as glad to escape, as Mrs. Ray was loth to part with her. Mary was evidently intended for the show guest of the evening; the hostess had striven hard to get her there, to prove to the world what friends they were together. That world was already slowly resolving itself into its component atoms; those who had far to go had already departed; supper at twelve P.M. had even no charms powerful enough to bid them stop.

As Mary and I left Mrs. Ray, a slim figure in evening dress stole from behind the window curtains where he had been hiding and sidled towards the lady of the house. He had been waiting and watching with great interest and now his patience was rewarded by a vacant seat near the hostess.

I thought of Vaughan's mocking words only a few moments since. "What a myriad of evil purposes hatching beneath these smiling masks!" For was it not an evil purpose to study the weakness, flatter the vanity of this poor decrepid woman in the lust for the gold of which she made parade.

"I think we have had enough of this festivity," I said, to my wife.

"Are you tired?"

"I am tired of this scene at least."

"Oh! I am very sorry, dear! I promised Mrs. Ray to stay till the party broke up; shall I go and ask her to withdraw my promise."

"No. They will break up soon, I am told. The guests are thinning already."

We sat down together to watch the varied crowd flitting so gaily by us. Letty Ray passed us more than once, but her attention was generally too much absorbed for us to intrude upon it. There were many dangles in her train; she was at least the reigning belle of that night.

"She is very handsome," whispered Mary; "after all she will make a good match."

"In every sense of the word, I hope so."

"She is as haughty as a queen, Canute." whispered my wife; "what a proud look she wears now!"

It seemed more disdainful than proud to me—on her face that told so much, and was so true an index to her feelings, I fancied that I could read her undisguised contempt for the court which her attendants paid her. In her rich silk dress, in her lace and jewels—jewels that had been my wife's once—she thought herself the inn-

keeper's daughter still; she was thinking of that past estate, and wondering where all this homage would have been if the change had never come to her. Her hearty contempt for what was low and servile pleased me; led me to regret that her character was not more likely to be influenced by those whose good example might soften it, and render it more truly womanly. For it was an unformed character yet, and I feared that the influences that might affect it in the future. A hot-tempered and impulsive woman, swayed by a word, and yet softened by a word; easily roused to anger, and yet by her wild affection easily led away!

I was looking at her still, when Herbert Vaughan joined her. I saw her face flush at his approach, and her eyes light up at the chance of his rescuing her from the crowd of dangles that beset her. She was leaning on his arm a moment afterwards, and he was stooping forward, and whispering to her very earnestly.

"They are great friends," said Mary, "what does it mean?"

"It means that they are great friends—nothing more I suppose," I answered absently.

I was thinking of the dark night when Letty Ray plunged wildly at death as to the one solace left her—of her cry then that she had been deceived in all which she had hoped in. Words more strange still came back to me, as though they had been spoken yesterday—"*Mark me, I will never cease to love that man!*"

Was that the man?—and if she loved him still what was to be the end of the story? It struck me that I gained a clearer insight into Vaughan's character that night, than I had done in all my past acquaintance with him. I felt that he was a villain, who studied nothing but his own selfish ends—that for himself and his position he was scheming, and that those in the way of his success were obstacles to be trampled under foot.

After all, he was no perfect villain. He betrayed too much at times; he was too earnest, too eager in the chase. With time before me, I felt that my matter-of-fact honesty of purpose would baffle him, and drag his schemes to daylight. He was to some extent a mystery to me, because time had not been spared me to attempt his divination. And with that time at my disposal, was the inclination strong enough to see to follow the tortuous windings of his crafty nature? I thought not then; I did not know how close the hour was, when tracking him would be the one main object of my life. It only struck me then that he was a knave—as I had always suspected—and that beneath the fair exterior lay a host of thoughts dangerous to all who mistrusted him, or guessed those thoughts too truly.

I looked round for Ellen, a woman of keen perception, and not likely to be a patient witness or a willing slave. With all his self-confidence, I felt that one great mistake in life was made when he took her for his wife. She was strong to resist—they must be strong measures to keep her down.

To my surprise Ellen was standing alone in the recess of the fourth window; she beckoned to me at once. Mary at the same instant was addressed by an old lady seated near her, an old lady who could scarcely believe that she was the Mrs. Zitman of Nettlewood, who leaned forward to ask the question, and claim a past acquaintance if the answer were in the affirmative.

"I shall be back in a minute," I whispered, and then crossed the room to Ellen's side.

"I am going home—good night," she said.

"Home—alone?"

"Yes—I am tired of this acting—I am sick at heart to-night. Will you see me to the fly?"

"Certainly, but——"

"But don't ask questions—I cannot answer them; they will not be worth answering," she said, hurriedly; "my excitement is over, and I shall be glad to get into my room before the reaction comes."

"Shall I find your husband?—he will doubtless be willing to accompany you."

Leave him to his own amusements," she said, dryly; "I have pledged my word not to interfere with him. He will not thank me if I claim his escort home."

"I will accompany you."

"It will lead to words, and I have escaped them lately. He will be home in good time, and I shall not sit up for him."

"Ellen, dear Ellen—you *are* unhappy. Will you trust in me?—will you ask me to help you?"

"You would help me with your whole heart if you had the power, my poor Canute," she said; "but you are powerless, and there are no weapons to parry the side-thrusts in the dark. Besides, I am not unhappy—ask me to swear to that?"

"No—no."

"You are nervous about me, but it is only the brother's love which starts into the light at a word. You think I am jealous?"

"No," I said, more dubiously.

"Jealous of Letty Ray—as if *that woman* had power to give me one heart-pang."

She crushed the bouquet in her hand as she spoke, and the flowers dropped silently to her feet, like the dead hopes over which she secretly mourned.

"Take me home," she said, again, impatiently.

She drew the opera-cloak closer round her shoulders, and we went out of the room together.

"Shall I speak to Herbert?" I said, when we had passed through the heavy curtains draping the doorway; "shall I tell him ——"

"Nothing," she interrupted me with; "I tell you again that I am not jealous. I have not one word to say against my husband, or the step that made him so, or the spell which drew him to me, and

entranced me with him. My God! how I loved that man, and would have died for him!"

"Courage!—courage!"

"Courage!" she exclaimed, indignantly, "do you fear *that*, too? My dear Canute, that grows stronger; that has power to keep its ground and defy the enemies who are mustering to do battle with me. If there be danger in advance of me—I see it, and have strength to meet it."

A little while ago, Ellen had spoken of her excitement being past for that night—I had never known her more excited than at that time. Her hand shook upon the arm which supported it; her face was strangely agitated. I should have liked to have assured her in that moment, but she checked me at once by saying, "Don't speak again!" And in what manner could I have assured her, guessing so vaguely at the dangers in her way?

A fly was waiting for her outside. On the threshold of the door she extended her hands towards me, before pushing back the hood from her face to gaze at me. That speaking face, that face which had turned so pale, and yet was so firm and defiant of her own hard fate, thrilled me—the look thereon I never forgot! In my dreams for many many nights it haunted me; between the parted curtains of my bed it looked down on me; in the business life it crossed me, and took away my breath—at times it haunts me still!

She looked so long and silently at me, that I said,

"Have you anything more to say, Ellen?"

"Yes."

Her hands tightened their clasp, and the lips parted.

"Whatever you may hear of me, believe not. In the future, when they speak against me, and I am dead or not by to answer them, reserve your judgment, and trust in God's good time to give the lie to them. The mists are closing round me, Canute, and I cannot see my way. Believe in me ever, Canute!"

She dropped my hands and darted into the carriage, reaching out her own white arm to close the door. I followed her, beset by a wild thought.

"You will say more than this, Nellie?"

"No. Kiss me and say good-bye."

"Good-bye, then."

She was in pain, and my presence there prolonged it. I turned away, and the driver applied his whip to the horse.

So the mists closed round her!

CHAPTER VI.

JOSEPH AND LETTY.

THE guests were hastening away. I met them coming from the ball-room towards me—the grating of many carriage-wheels I left behind, as I re-entered the house. The supper had been extended to too late an hour, and though many of the guests were fond of supper, yet time was valuable and long journeys were before them. Mrs. Ray's immediate neighbours were scattered sparsely at the supper table—it looked rather a dreary company assembled there.

"We're waiting for you, Mr. Gear," said Mrs. Ray, from the head of the table; "where's your sisters?"

"Gone home, ma'am."

"Gone home!" echoed Herbert Vaughan, from his seat immediately facing me, "ah!—well!"

He shrugged his shoulders in a demonstrative manner, and then addressed a few words to the lady at his side. He took Mrs. Vaughan's absence philosophically at least, and betrayed not any vexation at her abrupt retirement. He was the well-bred guest, courteous and smiling, whom nothing could ruffle; I felt that I could have leaned across the table and struck at him as he sat there stripping his primrose kids—stitched in an eccentric manner with black—from his white hands. My dislike to him was gathering strength—my sister's unhappiness—for it was unhappiness—had steeled my heart against him, and I hated him from that night.

"We're very short of people here," commented Mrs. Ray, who had gathered sufficient nerve to be more conversational; "I should have liked 'em to have stopped a bit and seen this. Hollo, are you going too?"

"Yes, madam."

The tall form of Mr. Wenford was blocking up the doorway. He looked very white and confused, I thought, and stared hard at Vaughan whilst replying to the hostess.

"You're in a hurry, Mr. Wenford?"

"Yes. I have business at home to transact—there's nothing to stop for here," he added, with his old abruptness.

"Then you'd better go," said Mrs. Ray, dry and indignant. "Now you lads," to the lacquies at the back, "be brisk, and do what's proper!"

Letty tried to attract her mother's attention from the opposite

end of the table, but the old lady was not to be attracted. The servants had brought her many glasses of port—she was always fond of port!—that evening, and her confidence had returned, and a fair portion of her old loquacity. She was mistress of the house, and had a right to speak.

Mr. Wenford took his departure as the clock on the mantel-piece chimed twelve, and Mrs. Ray directed her attention to Mr. Joseph Gear, sitting at her side, and very solicitous as to her tastes at supper. There was soon a hum of voices from the remaining guests, and Mrs. Ray's peculiarities of English were lost in the murmurs that ensued. I ate little myself; I was heartsick with anxiety concerning Ellen—her farewell words were ringing in my ears and troubling me.

I kept my eyes on Herbert Vaughan; for the first time in my life I sat down there to study him. His eyes were more restless than mine that night—I noticed that his hand trembled once, as he raised a wine-glass to his lips. He looked in my direction just then, and swerved from my intent gaze with a half frown that resented the scrutiny. He was talking to my wife the next moment—my wife, whom, with a strange politeness, he had escorted into the supper-room. But he could not rest—something beset him at the feast, I was assured. The reason for Ellen's absence, or the speculation in the lead mine which had proved so profitless, or one of a hundred thoughts, impossible for me to guess, came between him and the present scene, and took him far away from the company around him. He had less appetite than I had; I saw him push his plate aside a little impatiently, and sign to the footman to remove it. Whilst the footman's arm was passed between him and my wife, he glanced at my brother Joseph—leaned forward and looked down the length of the half-deserted table towards Letty Ray—once again glanced across at me, as though my attentive watch disturbed him.

"You are looking pale, Mr. Gear," he said to me across the table, "are you not well?"

"Yes—quite well," I answered.

Mary's face, full of interest, looked in the same direction on the instant—I could see the same question in her full grey eyes. I smiled at her, and her face lighted up at once—what had I done in my time to deserve so pure and deep a love!

The supper was over, and the guests were seized with a mad hurry to be gone. They were tired of dancing, of their illiterate hostess, of the late hour to which the festivity had been prolonged; they were early-retiring, early-rising people, and the dissipation into which they had plunged began to scare them. There was a rush from the house, a general flitting away. When we returned to the drawing-room, Mrs. Ray was sitting before the empty fire-grate in the old home posture, and Letty crouching at her side as of yore. Never did the splendid trappings of these women look more out of place—

remind me more of the Ferry Inn, and the peat fire burning in that narrow stifling room they had exchanged for this.

My wife was waiting for me there; Joseph Gear was lingering still, and disinclined to move. Herbert Vaughan, with his primrose kids on again, was swinging his hat in his hand.

"Shall you and I go back together, Mr. Gear?" asked Vaughan of Joseph.

"No, sir," with considerable firmness, "I am waiting for my brother."

"As you will. Good night all."

And Herbert Vaughan was one more guest removed.

He had scarcely passed through the curtained door when Letty sprang up, as if it had been the signal for her attack on Joseph Gear.

"You had better go, sir!" she exclaimed, with a quivering voice; "I warn you that you had better go at once."

Mrs. Ray was even startled out of her stoicism by the fierce voice—by this extraordinary sequence to "a pleasant evening."

"Heyday! what does this mean?"

"What does *he* mean," cried Letty, fiercely, "by coming here day after day, by speaking of me and warning you of me, as he has done to-night?"

"I—I—I," began Joseph, turning of a lively grey, and dropping into a chair at this dead thrust at him, "I—I beg to be allowed to explain myself."

"There needs no explanation, sir," cried Letty; "it explains itself, you poor schemer, grasping at the money which shall never be yours—scheme as you may. I tell you from this night that I will not have you here—that I am mistress here!"

She drew herself up proudly as she proclaimed the fact. Joseph shrank more and more, and bit his finger-nails perplexedly.

"Mistress!" exclaimed Mrs. Ray, making a stand upon her dignity.

"Mistress or nothing," cried Letty; "you are in your dotage, and are the tool of such bad men as he. I must protect you, or leave you to yourself—which is to be?"

"In my dotage!—of all the impudence I've ever heard, that caps it!"

Joseph saw his advantage—Mrs. Ray was shaking with passion at her daughter's charge—he darted in here, defiant of his audience.

He rose and skipped towards the old lady.

"Mrs. Ray, your daughter has insulted me before my brother and his wife—chosen her time purposely to insult me, as I choose it now to defend myself. She may be naturally mortified at any wish of mine to make you more happy than *she* has done, and to devote my life-long service to you."

Joseph's words pleased her no more than her daughter's. Her response to them seemed an echo of her reply to Letty.

"Life-long service! Of all the fools I've ever met, you cap 'em!"

"God bless me!" ejaculated Joseph.

"I've got my wits about me—there's no dotage yet," she cried; "I can see my daughter thinks more of herself than me, and that you are the silliest of men. I thought you'd come to this, and was likely to fall into the trap instead of me. You've been uncommon kind, Joseph Gear, but I don't want to see you again. It makes words—it makes words!"

"I—I wonder where my hat is?" Joseph murmured, as he feebly made towards the door, beaten down and utterly humiliated. When he was half-way towards the corridor, he gave a little run and disappeared, glad to let the curtain drop upon him.

"Mother," said Letty, letting her jewelled hand fall on the old woman's shoulder, "I ask your pardon. I have misjudged you—I thought you that man's dupe."

"I was a-trying you all the time—how you would bear it—what he'd do and say at last. But, oh! lor—it's been a'most too much for me!"

"Leave her now—leave her," said Letty, almost impatiently; "I wish to speak with her—to show her that I am her daughter still."

"Daughter or mistress?" asked the mother.

"Daughter!"

She dropped down at her feet again, and took the old woman's hand in hers—from that picture, new and touching to both of us, we turned away.

Joseph was not waiting for us—at the Ferry Inn he was not visible when we arrived. In our room Mary and I talked long and earnestly of all the events of that night, perplexing and inscrutable. I fell asleep before the subject was fully discussed—I was awakened by her hand upon my shoulder, shaking me.

"Canute—Canute, do wake!"

"What's the matter?—what is it?"

Mary was sitting up in bed, with a shawl fastened round her.

"Hush!—do you hear anything?"

"Nothing."

I strained my ears to listen, but all was silent as the grave.

"Not the plash of oars? Some one is crossing the Ferry!"

"Nonsense, Mary—you have been dreaming."

"I have been sitting up here listening some time," she said, shuddering. "Oh! Canute, I feel as if there was mischief abroad to-night!"

"In the bright morning we shall laugh at this."

She lay down, and fell asleep again—moaning at times in her sleep, as though in pain. Once she whispered in her sleep, "Some one is crossing the Ferry!" with a sharpness and distinctness that chilled

me as I listened. She must have slept, and I must have lain awake an hour, when a pistol-shot, afar off amongst the mountains, roused me to something like action. I stole from my bed, without waking my wife, and drew the blind aside from the casement to peer forth. It was not morning yet, but the late moon was struggling to shine through the mass of fleecy cloud below it. It was neither light nor dark. I could see the quiet water, and the Ferry house below me—afar off stretched the barren hills, walls of rock, that shut all in, and hid all secrets from me. It was a cold, repellent landscape.

All was still and unfathomable—there was nothing beyond to guess at.

“In the bright morning we shall laugh at this,” I had said to Mary before she slept again, confident in my assertion, and believing that I must be right. But there was no bright morning waiting for us—only greater doubts and deeper fears.



CHAPTER VII.

THE WORST OF NEWS.

I ROSE early. The night's, or rather the early morning's, interruption had rendered me restless, and I could not lie idle after sunrise. I rose depressed; an indefinable sense of something wrong weighed me down. True to last night's promise, I tried to laugh at this—to attribute it to Mrs. Ray's party the late hours, and the fitful rest that had succeeded it. Leaving Mary asleep, I went cautiously downstairs, lest I should wake Jabez, who was in no hurry to rise, business being slack. The tap-room door was open as I passed, and looking in I perceived my brother Joseph leaning with his arms across the settle, and his head buried in his arms. He was a light sleeper, for he looked up, and called out “Who's there?”

“It is I. I am going for a stroll. My head aches.”

“I'll—I'll go with you.”

He rose very wearily, and came out of the Inn with me, very red and sleepy-eyed. The door was on the latch—a custom of Jabez's, of which I could not break him.

“Who was coming in?—who was going to rob a place like his'n?”

Joseph was in his last night's dress—as near an approach to evening dress as he had managed to extemporize for the occasion, and he emerged into the daylight the feeblest and flabbiest of individuals.

“Have you not been to bed?” I asked.

“No—I couldn't sleep,” he said, yawning; “I have been wandering about half the night trying to cool the fever here.”

He laid his hand on the top of his head in a ludicrous manner.

“Did you hear a pistol fired in the night?” I asked, my thoughts recurring to one element of disturbance which had kept me restless.

“Yes—at five-and-twenty minutes past two. I timed it by my watch.”

“Why?” I asked.

“It seemed strange, and I like to be precise in these matters.”

“Did anything else happen that was strange that night?”

“Well—I don't see the ferry boat, that's all.”

I went out of the house followed by my brother. I proceeded at once to the Ferry, and discovered that the boat was missing, and that the rope which had fastened it to the platform had been cut through.

“This is singular,” I said, standing at the waters' edge, and staring at this evidence of mystery before me.

“Everything seems singular about here,” commented Joseph.

“What do you mean?” I said, turning quickly upon him.

“Everything puzzles me, and I don't understand anything—that's all.”

“Have you seen anything more?” I asked.

Joseph, with his hands thrust to the bottom of his trousers pockets, stood gravely surveying the water. I repeated my question before he answered me.

“Nothing more,” he said; “but this is singular enough. P'raps—p'raps it's a joke of somebody's. The young fellows at the party drank Mrs. Ray's wine pretty freely, didn't they?”

“I did not notice.”

“I did,” he said; “it was an awful waste. Mrs. Ray drank a good deal of wine, too. She was always nudging the waiter and croaking ‘Port, John.’ As selfish an old beast as ever lived!” he added.

“Why, Joseph—opinions have changed, old fellow?”

“Well they may,” he said, “when people change and turn against one. I'm going back to London to-day.”

“So soon?”

“I can't stop here,” he added; “it's a waste of time now, and I've a living to get. Which do you call the nearest way to Keswick and Borrowdale?”

“The nearest way on foot!”

“I can't afford to ride,” he answered, testily.

"The very nearest is over the Black and White Gaps—but its difficult work. The second way is by the car road, that runs at the foot of the mountains opposite."

"Humph!" said my brother, "I'll consider which of the two, I shall take. What do you think of the weather?"

"That it will continue fine."

"Then I'll attempt the Gaps in an hour or two. My head aches very much. I think I'll try and get another nap before the landlord comes clumpeting down in his heavy boots. I shall see you again."

He dawdled back towards the Inn, and left me still at the water's edge. Across the water I could see the ferry boat carefully tied to the small landing-stage there. Whoever had gone across Nettlewood water had not returned, at least, and had been courteous enough to secure the boat for its proprietor. After all, perhaps the proprietor had gone across himself, and I was perplexing myself with ridiculous suppositions. I turned away, and set forth on a brisk walk down the Henlock road. The air was fresh, the sun was bright, the birds were darting to and fro—a walk would do me good, and scare away the morbid fancies which beset me.

I went on briskly, as though I would outwalk them. The early morning air did some good, and relieved my mind from a degree of weight. I passed The Larches—Mr. Wenford's house—and noticed that three servants were standing in an abstracted manner together in the lawn, with their hands behind them, engaged in some desultory conversation. I went on to Nettlewood Crag, the site of the lead mine which had proved so unprofitable a speculation. I touched the church gate through which Mary and I had returned husband and wife. I strolled to the bank of Henlock Water, and sat down there to rest awhile.

Strange, that directly I was still, I felt depressed again—the waves of the sea of uncertainty broke again in hollow murmurs against the shore—I must be stirring—doing. I sprang to my feet, and retraced my steps rapidly—the church-gate, the lead mine, Mr. Wenford's house, before which the servants were standing still, were passed again—I was approaching the Ferry Inn once more.

The Nettlewood waters were glistening in the sun as I approached; the ferry boat was coming towards our side of the stream—Jabez's man was rowing quietly to the shore; Jabez displaying rather an excited aspect, was on the platform awaiting his man's arrival.

I proceeded to Jabez at once.

"You have recovered your boat, I see."

"John had to go all round to Mr. Vaughan's, and borrow his boat to cross, and then take Mr. Vaughan's home; and your brother wanting to cross the Ferry all the while, and a-bullying o' me, as if I could help the fool's trick that summun's played me! I'll be doon upon summun for this."

"My brother has not gone?" I asked.

"But he ha'," was the response; "John's just tooked him across. If ye'll wait a bit, Mr. Gear, he'll be seen round the turn of the Gap, yonder."

"Did he leave any message?"

"Only that he couldn't stop till you came back. Mr. Vaughan knows more, perhaps."

"Mr. Vaughan!—where is he?"

"In the parlour, waiting for you, sir. He has been here this hour."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

I turned indignantly from Jabez, and passed into the best parlour of the Ferry Inn. There I stood, and held my breath with wonder at the scene before me.

My wife was crouched upon the floor almost at her brother's feet, as though she had been kneeling to him, and, failing in entreaty, had given way, and covered her face with her hands to hide her bitter grief away from him. She was sobbing very heavily when I entered; her long fair hair had become disordered, and was hanging over her face and hands—a golden shower. Herbert Vaughan, erect and motionless, stood by her side, with a letter in his hand. He turned a haggard, yet a stern face as I entered.

"I have been waiting for you, Gear," he said.

My wife sprang to her feet, and ran towards me.

"Oh! let me tell him in my own way," she said, to her brother; I, who understand him so much better than you!"

"Mary, I do not shrink at the manner of relating any misfortune—if there be one in store for us. I am not a child," I answered.

"It is so heavy—it is so unprepared for!"

"I am prepared—don't fear."

"What is his misfortune to mine!—his loss to my own!" cried Vaughan, sternly.

"Ellen—it's about Ellen?" I said, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Dead!" I exclaimed.

"If she were," said Vaughan, bitterly, "it would be a blessing to us both. No, sir, simply dishonoured."

"It's a lie!" I shouted.

Vaughan coloured, but he did not lose his temper. He was as stern as fate, and my raving did not shake his immobility. At my vehemence, my wife shrank back from me.

"My despair is beyond your empty passion, and will outlive it," he said, with dignity; when you are calmer, I will go on."

"Go on, Mr. Vaughan. I am calm now."

"Your sister left Mrs. Ray's last night—to return home for a few moments for her jewels and my money, and then departed from my house for ever."

"This letter, which was left on my library-table, to await my return from Mrs. Rays."

He placed it in my hands ; I tore it open, and read these lines—

Nettlewood House, July 20th, 18—.

"Twelve o'clock.

"I must leave you. Life, here, embittered by your want of love, your cruelty, is worse than death. In this house, the same spell that weighed down your sister, and drove her to my brother's arms, drives me from right, and leads me on to seek my fate. All is forgiven on my side. Some day, thinking of the step that leads me thus away from you, and of the share you had in it, you will forgive me too. For the last time

"Your unhappy wife,
"ELLEN."

I read and re-read this, and could not catch the meaning. All was so sudden and improbable; the motive for the unnatural step was so darkly figured in these tragic lines. I knew alone that she had gone of her own wild will away from him, and that the mystery around us all was very dense indeed.

"It is incomprehensible," I gasped.

"It is the easiest thing in all the world to guess at," he retorted; "The vilest woman has some excuse to offer for a sinful step, and *she* knew the world would talk of her. She charges me with want of love and cruelty; she talks of a spell upon the house, in the language of a romancist rather than a sober woman; and then, with these flimsy pretexts for her guilt, she dashes down to ruin!"

"I will not have this, Vaughan!" I cried; "as her brother, knowing and valuing her more than you, I demand you to pause before you thus condemn her. There is no evil thought therein that I can see—but much that tells me of a great unhappiness under which her woman's strength gave way."

"She was not unhappy with me—ask my servants, Janet, any one who has seen us day by day. You did not value her more than I. She had strength to bear with home until the whisper of my ruin began to circulate in Nettlewood."

"False!—unfair!"

He played his trump card then. With the same rigidity of demeanour, the same iciness that spoke of a determination impossible to change, he drew from his breast pocket a second letter, and flung it on the table before me.

"Her paramour is more explicit."

I seized that second letter, and wrenched it open likewise. I was dying for any light upon the darkness of the way before me. This was more convincing, and struck a heavier blow.

"July 20, 18—.

"Forgive me and my betrayal of a trust, but the tide's too strong for me. For the sake of our old friendship, I have fought an unequal fight and am vanquished. I am really Mad Wenford now—to all intents and purposes as raving mad as any lunatic from Hanwell. Ellen accompanies me.

"NED WENFORD."

"Enough, Mr. Vaughan. Spare me all further proof, if there be any yet remaining."

"You are convinced of my lasting shame and hers?"

"God knows," I cried, fighting wildly with my doubts, "I am convinced of nothing!"

I flung the letter to the floor; he picked them up carefully, and secured them in the breast-pocket of his coat. The action attracted me.

"Will you leave those letters with me? I should like to read them again—to study them."

"They are too valuable evidence for me to risk their loss," he said; "I will forward you copies in the course of the day."

"Do you think I would steal them?"

"There might be a temptation to destroy them—you are the champion of your sister's honour," he said, mockingly.

I lost command of my temper again at this.

"There is a devilish calmness which hinders me from pitying you!" I cried; "a mocking triumph beneath your stoicism that tells me you were prepared for this—that you lured her on to this, and knew as surely as herself where the end would inevitably lead! Man! if you saw this and did not put forth your power to stop her—if, by your cruelty, you made your home unbearable to her—you are the assassin of her moral life, and will answer for it to your God!"

He stood there listening calmly with a watchfulness in his brown eyes lest I should aim a blow at him. His lips compressed when I uttered the word "assassin," but the mocking air wreathed them before the last word had passed my own. He was cold and statuesque throughout the interview.

"My time for raving was over hours ago," said he; "for yours I make allowance now. Say what you will, taunt me in my heavy trouble as you will, the words can sting me not. In the sober time when you, like me, must look at this with different eyes, you will think more justly. Your pity is for the undeserving—I have but my bitter wrong to study. We stand on different grounds, Gear."

It was difficult to answer him. His was the vantage ground, and I was beneath him then. And my pity *was* for Ellen!

And yet, if he had but betrayed one evidence of sorrow at his loss, given vent to one paroxysm of anger at the shame he had inherited by hers, I could have seized his hand and asked to work with him—to help him. But that rigidity, that hardness which repelled all sympathy, turned me from him—even against him.

"It is a mystery," I murmured; "leave me with it."

"Another time, when you are disposed to be more charitable," he said, "we may discuss this fact. That is," he corrected, "if that discussion side not with the guilty woman who has left my home. To speak of her with pity, and demand my sympathy, is to seal my lips for ever on the subject—to end all intimacy between us."

"Let it end, sir," I said, my wrath of manner coming back again in spite of me; "what has your intimacy done for me, but to render me distrustful of you? Let it end, sir—there is no one in the world I care less to call my friend!"

"This is the world's charity," said Vaughan; "had she not been your sister, you would have been the first to set the laugh against me—to jest with your friends at the admirable manner in which she stole away."

"Think so if you will, sir."

"Well, sir," he added, continuing his theme, "it is natural enough. To remember that you are my wife's brother will not add to the intensity of my affection for you, though I could forget—which I will not till my dying day—the hand of sympathy extended to me here. Good day."

"How will you act?—what is to be done?" I asked.

"I move not a hair's breadth," he said; "she is beyond all help."

I felt that, although I strove against the thought. I sat down at the table, and leaned my forehead on my hand to brood on this. I had no more to say to him, no more to ask. He stood for a moment looking at me, as at some curious phenomenon that puzzled him, and then with the same unmoved countenance he passed out into the sunlight. The moment afterwards I was at the window watching him. He held me spell-bound, and I could not shake him from my mind. Before Ellen—before my suffering wife, that man was paramount, and took the preference. I watched him—a dark figure in the sunshine, out of place and unreal, beyond all human comprehension. Words that he had spoken, acts that he had done yesternight crowded upon me, and shut out all pity for him; there was something more akin to hate for him, strengthening within me. No pity when I saw him pause, and press his two hands to his temples, as though a dart had struck him there—when he reeled a little in his walk before he mustered strength to go on again past the clump of trees, where the road turned, and I lost him.

Between me and all sympathy for him were Ellen's farewell words to me; they never rung more truly, forcibly in my ears, than at that

hour when I stood watching at the window. They came back, wore for word, not to give me hope to solve the mystery, but yet to keep some remnant of past faith in Ellen clinging to me still.

"In the future, when they speak against me, and I am dead, or not by to answer them, reserve your judgment, and trust in God! good time to give the lie to them. The mists are closing round me and I cannot see my way!"



CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST QUARREL.

I TURNED from the window, and remembered Mary for the first time. In the half protest, half recrimination that had characterized my interview with Vaughan, she had been wholly forgotten.

She was standing near a small side table, with her hands clasped upon it, and her eyes intently fixed on her garish tea-tray with which it was ornamented. All the past interview she had stood there, and listened, keeping ever her gaze averted from us, but drinking in each word with greedy eagerness. Looking at her then, she seemed to me as one stunned by a heavy blow; a woman whose powers of comprehension had not returned yet to give her full knowledge of all that had disgraced us.

"Mary," I said in a low voice.

"She looked at me then—came slowly, almost timidly towards me, and held forth both arms.

"Oh! take me to your heart and comfort me," she moaned.

"Why do you ask for comfort?"

"I have done wrong. My God, I did not know how wrong until this hour."

I held her at arm's length in lieu of folding her to my breast. I was a tyrant, who had no mercy that day—who, for woman's weakness tolerated no excuse.

"Wrong—what wrong?"

"I should have warned you of him."

"My instincts warned me that there was danger in him, Mary?"

"I should have warned you," she repeated.

"Go on—what more?"

Her scared face was upturned to mine; upon it was a look of agony I could not fathom yet.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Is that true?—is there more mystery to pierce?"

Don't hold me thus!—don't look like that!" she cried; "it is my brother's face, with all its hate of me come back."

"You were kneeling to him when I entered. What was that for?"

The look of agony was more intense. She tried to wrestle from me then, but my hands still held her firmly.

"Kneeling kneeling!" she gasped.

"Mary, is there any truth that you dare shrink from telling me—you of all women in the world?"

"I cannot tell you this."

"*You shall.*"

"No, no! For your own sake, for your peace hereafter, so help my God, I will not!"

Her eyes dilated as she looked at me—there was defiance, yet horror in her face. My firmness roused her own, and set her against me for the first—the last time! Surely an evil spirit had possessed me that day—where was the self-command which had earned me in old days the name of Patience Gear—where was my husband's love, solicitude and charity? I was beside myself, and I stamped my foot upon the floor. I felt her wince, too beneath my coward's grasp.

"Is it a secret?"

"Yes."

"I will have no more of it. I am tired of mystery, and the jugglery of this half-confidence, which still more deceives me. I will have my answer, or"—I reiterated her own awful oath—"I lose my whole trust in you! The truth—the whole truth—that bars my way to Ellen, or a curse upon the marriage which has borne such bitter fruit as this."

"Mercy!"

She sank through my hands towards the floor—I saw her eyes close, and a pallor as of death steal over her. There flashed to my heated brain a sense of all my cowardice, and inconsiderateness towards her.

"Mary, forgive me—look up at me! I am a villain and a fool, and have been raving in a dream!"

Jabez opened the door at my excited tone of voice.

"Did you call, sir?"

"Water!—quick! Mrs. Gear has fainted."

Jabez disappeared, and reappeared again, followed by the maid-servant who had succeeded Letty in the household duties.

"Ye'd better leave her to me," she said, "a moment please. If I can't bring her to, I'll screech."

Jabez and I went out of the room; Jabez full of a new idea, set

off running down the high-road. I called out to him but he took no heed. Presently the woman's face peered through the half opened door, at which I stood a sentinel.

"I can't bring loife to her—it's beyon' me."

I dashed into the room, to beg in my old appeal of her, to wring my hands over her, to raise her in my arms and support her head against my breast.

"I'll burn some feythers—I'll—oh! lor' a mussy, what shall I do, sir?"

The girl had become frightened, and seemed inclined to imitate her master's example and run away.

"More water!" I shouted; "don't you see the glass is empty?"

"But water was in vain—she lay in my arms like a dead woman.

"Run for the chemist, or whatever he is, in the cottage at the corner there!"

"I think the measter's gone."

She was right. Jabez, and a weak minded old man, who dealt in drugs and groceries, entered whilst she still lay motionless. The new comer looked at her, and lost his presence of mind at once.

"I—I don't know much about it," he stammered; "I think I'd take her up to her room—I—I never saw such a swoond as that!"

"Who lives at Henlock?" I cried.

"Doctor Haynes—a clever man. He was the family doctor of the Vaughans and Zitmans, and is used to her."

"Saddle a horse, Jabez, and ride as for your life! For *her* life, which is at stake here!"

I bore her upstairs to her room. Do I know how I passed the time till Doctor Haynes's carriage rattled towards the Ferry?—were they not years, wherein I raved and called down vengeance on my madness?

He bustled into the room—the sick room's genius. I could have shouted with joy at his appearance, as though he brought life and health along with him. He was a big burly man, of seventy years of age, with hair as white as snow—a handsome gentleman, whom I had noticed last night for a moment at the Ray's gathering. He stopped and looked attentively at Mary, taking her hand from mine, and applying his fingers to her wrist.

"Again!" he muttered, "after all these years."

"Again!" I mechanically repeated.

"Not so many years, after all," he said, turning to me; "but she was Mr. Zitman's wife, and then a widow of twelve hours old. More of a child than wife or widow, poor girl!"

"She has been subject to these stupors?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!"

The doctor laughed rather unsympathetically.

"That's an odd thing to thank God for, Mr. Gear"

"I feared that I had killed her."

"Oh! no," regarding me with a dubious expression, "she will recover in an hour or two. It's a fainting fit of some duration. Has she been excited?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I thought so. Is there a woman about?"

"The girl down downstairs."

"She's a fool. Send for the bony woman—Jane or Janet—at Nettlewood House. She understands her, and is the best of nurses."

I felt my heart lighten at this suggestion. Janet, the old nurse, the old friend who had loved her so long, was the fitting woman at this time. I wondered that I had not thought of her before.

A messenger was despatched; I was left to wander in and out of the room wherein she lay so still, with the doctor and the maid-servant doing their best in vain.

In a short while—it seemed an age to me—the tall angular form of Janet Muckersie stood in the doorway. She was as pale and haggard as her master had been; in her strange love for him did she take her share of the trouble and shame which had fallen on the house of Vaughan? Her deep-set eyes gravely surveyed me as I expressed my satisfaction at her arrival. A consciousness of all that had happened between me and my wife, she seemed to guess by intuition. I shrank from the cold criticism to which I was exposed.

"Be a' the troubles coomin' at aince?" she said; "what ha' happened?"

"Mary has fainted. We cannot bring her back to consciousness."

"Did they quarrel—the bairn and she?" she asked quickly.

"No—I believe not."

"Not ye twa!" she said more eagerly; "anythin' rather nor that, I'd care to hear just noo."

"Janet," I confessed, "I have acted like a villain. It has all arisen from the dreadful news which Vaughan brought here, and which has turned my brain, I think."

"News of Mrs. Vaughan?" she said gloomily.

"Yes."

"Ah! news of horror—*them*. But," putting me aside with her strong arm, "let me see the lassie noo—I may be o' help to her."

She passed into the room, and closed the door somewhat precipitately in my face.

"We'll send for ye prisently, Measter Gear," she muttered.

The doctor and Janet remained a long while in that chamber, the door of which was closed against me. A prey to a suspense from which I hope ever to be spared again, I went downstairs and wandered about the lower rooms, from the tap-room to the best room, thence to the back parlour and kitchen, back once more to the scene of conflict between my wife and me. The spirit of unrest was on me—my morbid feelings were acute enough to torture me with

the belief that she would pass from her stupor into the valley of death, and make no further sign.

When the suspense was driving me mad, the good news came that she was slowly recovering. The doctor brought me the tidings, and arrested my fitful wanderings about the house.

"I think she'll do now, Mr. Gear," he said; "I shall look in again in the course of an hour."

"May I see her?"

"It is not judicious," he remarked; "her recovery from these stupors has been always marked by some mental aberration, and to disturb her at the time is dangerous."

"When am I to see her then?"

"In good time, my dear sir. Ask Janet."

I stole up to the bed-room door again, and knocked softly—very softly—on the panel. Janet opened the door a few inches, and looked through at me.

"Na yet," she said gruffly.

"Speak to her of me—tell her how wretched I am—how truly wretched at my own fool's anger."

"Preesently—she is na well eno' to care muckle for yeer messages. Wha's doon stairs?"

"Jabez and the servant."

"Send to the Hoose, and tell them that I dinna leave here a' the day—verra likely a' the night. They need na expect to see me till I coom."

"Janet—is she very ill?"

"She will be better soon, please God."

"*Some one is crossing the ferry—Canute, Canute!*" murmured a voice from within. Janet closed the door at once, and shut out that plaintive cry, so terribly suggestive of last night's doubts, and the awful truths by which they had been succeeded.

All that long day I was debarred from seeing her. The doctor came again, and looked more grave on returning from the sick-room.

"Is she not better?" I asked.

"Not yet. Her brain is disturbed still; fever, I fear, is on the increase. Janet will not go back to-night."

Later in the day he came again, and looked a shade more grave still. Towards evening a messenger arrived from Nettlewood House; "Mr. Vaughan would be glad to know how his sister was." Hearing she was no better, the messenger added, that "Janet was on no account to leave Mrs. Gear."

Later again, when the night was dark, and the wind had risen, the doctor came a fourth time and left his last injunctions for the night. He sought me out before his departure.

"She is less restless, and appears inclined to sleep," he said; but I would not attempt to see her to-night, Mr. Gear."

"What possible harm can accrue from my seeing her if she remain unconscious?" I asked.

"She will recognize you as she does Janet and me. But the recognition cannot be beneficial, and may lead to irreparable harm."

"Enough, sir—I will not attempt to see her."

I sat down, prepared to face the worst. If it had come that night I could have met it, for I had but little hope of brighter times from that day. I wanted neither food nor rest; books could not distract my mind an instant; Ellen's flight from home appeared to have happened years ago, and to have become a misty retrospect. My whole soul was merged in the illness of my wife, and all that had suddenly led to it.

Jabez came in twice or thrice after the Ferry Inn was closed for the night, to ask if I wished for dinner, tea, or supper—all of which I had neglected—if he should prepare a bed for me in another room, if there were any orders of any kind whatever, which he could cheerfully fulfil. My stony apathy weighed upon this honest man; it was out of the regular course of things, and Jabez and I had become good friends. I had listened to Jabez's hundred and one complaints about the business, and the repairs, and lowered his rent to meet the hardness of the times, and I think Jabez would have gone farther, and done more for me, than for most people.

My negatives to everything perplexed him; my advice to him that he should leave me sitting up, he was inclined to object to; but there was no altering my resolution, and, after telling me that the maid was ready to help Janet if required, he left me to my solitary watch.



CHAPTER IX.

JANET.

How the wind howled that night! It shrieked amongst the mountains; it came moaning up the Vale, and round the Ferry Inn; it rushed against the house full front and rocked it as I sat there. Rain came with it after a while, dashed against the window-pains, rattled fitfully without amongst the trees, and kept up a steady, heavy dropping from the eaves.

It was a night congenial to my frame of mind; there was a restlessness about its stormy character which suited, even composed me. Why should stars be shining and summer zephyrs whispering in the Vale when all within my heart was of the veriest depth and gloom?

The door opened silently, and Janet came in. She drew a chair to the table, and sat down at a little distance from me. She was looking very aged and worn.

"How is she, Janet?"

"Snatching at sleep in raal faver fashion," she returned; "I ha' left her, as she's a bit calmer, mayhap, to coom to ye."

"I may not see her, then?" I said.

"I would na. It's a queere kind of 'lirin, and a straw turns her in sic keends of doonstrokes. She wad ken ye, and it'd a' coom back agin, and she'd be warse."

"I will sit here patiently."

"I've coom to sit wi' ye a moment," she said, with a half sigh that did not escape me.

"Janet—do you fear any danger?"

"N—na," she said, in a hesitative manner, "I canna say I do *yet*. Bide a wee—this is na patience, sir."

"How is it that I have never heard of these stupors before?"

"I canna sae. P'raps she thoct that she'd lived them doon, as she micht hae doon—as I beleev'd she wad."

There was a pause, broken but by the sougning of the wind outside. Janet was scarcely satisfied, however; she got up and listened at the door, and then returned again.

"I ken the time when these swoonds came verra aften—far too aften to be alwa' roonin' after Doctor Haynes. When an angry word at last wud do it, and when, to keep the truth frae her—when it war a hard truth—war the best and the keendest method. Wi' ye, Maister Gear," looking sadly at me, "I did hope to hear na mair o' this."

"I have been wrong. God forgive me!"

"Her puir head burns like a coal," said Janet; "gin it turns to brain faver, there's a hard feicht for her—and I sae muckle to do!"

"Janet—you will not leave us?"

"In this trooble—is it like me? Hae I been sae lang true to the Vaughans, that I shad shreenk frae my duty at a time like this?"

"But your master—"

"He wull spare me—he wull be glad to spare me."

She edged her chair nearer to me, and laid her large hand on my arm.

"Tell me how it a' happened—what did ye twa find to quarrel aboot?"

I told her word for word—excusing nothing, urging no word of extenuation. She listened with her customary stolidity, but there was an eagerness in her eyes that was new to me.

"Ye dinna luv the bairn—ye suspect him still?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Ye do not peety him e'en noo—ye beleeve that he war na keend to his wife, and she war dreeven like frae hame?"

"What else can I believe?"

"I ha' kenned that mon frae childhood. I ha' prayed far him ever since he war a wee thing in my arms!"

"I have known Ellen from an infant too—I have found her ever the same—high-spirited, pure-minded, striving ever to do good."

"I ne'er understood her," was the cold reply.

I thought the subject had tired her, for she rose again and listened at the door. I was feverishly impatient for her to go, and not leave my wife so long to the charge of the stupid maid-servant; her harsh voice jarred upon me, and irritated me—her defence of Herbert Vaughan, and her luke-warm interest in his wife, seemed to bring back to me some of the excitement of the morning.

My heart sank when she came back and resumed her seat facing me.

"It's a awfu' nicht!" she said, shivering a little; "how the weend and rain come doon the valley like twa mad theengs. She war high-speerited," she added, reverting to the past subject with a startling precipitancy; "ay, she war prood, and stood aloof, and wud na trust in me. I war her husband's spy, tellin' him everythin' and bringin' on na end of troobles, she thought. Puir lassie, puir lassie, if she had kenned all, what a different end it might ha' been for her! If I'd let her see—if I'd ony let her see that I war larnin' to luv her, to ask her o' my ain free will to let me be her freend."

"You saw her unhappiness, Janet?"

"It is an unhappy hoose—it's haunted by an evil speerit."

"It is."

"Na—not him! I did na' say *him*—bear me weetness," she cried, starting to her feet, "ye war alwa' hatin' him in yeer heart, and ye're na an hoonest judge."

"Is Ellen guilty?—woman, had she no excuse to fly?"

"Is there ana' excuse feettin' an act like hers?"

I saw the evasion, and with that stern persistence which had already worked such mischief, I would not have it thrust forward as an answer.

"Janet, as you are an honest and God-fearing woman, had my sister Ellen no excuse to fly?"

"Ye wull worry me wi' na mair questions—ye will let 'em a' end, sae far as I, a puir servant, am consarned?"

"Yes."

"*Then she ha'!* She war in meesery, and would ha' deed there. She had a richt to flee frae death, I think. But I ken naethin'," she added, "I'm a fulish woman, and oh! my heart is sair awfu' heavy. Never in a' my leef to smile agin, to feel as in the auld days when I war Mary's comforter! What's that!"

The maid-servant came tumbling into the room, with her eyeballs protruding and her cap awry.

"I can't sit there and hear her any longer!" she cried; "please go up and see to her, and stop her talking. I ain't the nerve—I'm going to be ill myself, I think—my blood runs awfu' cold! She said——"

"Begon'!" shouted Janet, running at her, and brandishing one hand in her face; "begon', I say!"

"Hush" I cried, "she calls you."

My voice, harsh and imperative, arrested Janet and the inn servant. In the pause, the silvery voice of the sick woman thrilled its way towards us.

"Janet, Janet, I say."

To my surprise, Janet's sepulchral voice gave answer.

"I am coomin'—patience—*seelence*, dear."

"He is crossing the ferry—there's murder—murder—murder in his looks!"

The maid-servant gasped for breath and wrung her hands with fear. I sprung to my feet when Janet's face—it was the face of a ghost!—warned me back.

"Keep there, sir. The rain and wind sair disturb her. Dinna follow, for her leef's sake."

Janet stole away, and in her forgetfulness shut the servant-maid in with me. The girl dropped on to the extreme edge of the chair near the door, and looked piteously towards me.

"If I ony might sit here, sir, and say nothing. I've been scared a'most to death."

"Sit there, if you will."

"When people's heads is turned, what makes them think of murder, sir?"

"I don't know—don't speak—I'm weary."

So the night passed, and the light burned low. It was a relief to see the grey morning come again, though it brought but little hope with it. The servant was lolling in the chair, with her head hanging over the back, asleep and snoring—but my red eyes faced the daylight, and my discontented spirit felt as though peace and rest were gone for ever from me.

CHAPTER X.

ILLNESS.

THE fever of the brain, dreaded alike by the doctor and Janet, set in next day; there was danger to her life; but a little way distant seemed the rock on which a life-long happiness might split.

I gave up hope myself; I was inclined to think the worst, and there was a horrible satisfaction in asserting that all hope was over, and there could come never again a gleam of brighter times for me. Neither the doctor nor Janet despaired, but I would not listen to them, and I believe they feared that my own brain was on the turn. But they did not know, they could never guess, the depth and intensity of my love for the sufferer. That love had been born of romance; it had been strengthened by her noble sacrifice for me; it had become a part of my moral being, and I must die without it. In the reality of those few angry words I could scarcely believe now; to charge myself with striking at her weakness, with adding to a trouble that had come upon her and had borne her down before my dastard conduct overwhelmed her, seemed part of a dream in the wild unrealities of which I still was labouring.

In the midst of this great trouble, my mother came and took her place beside me. We did not speak of Ellen for several days; but the mother had aged marvellously since I had seen her last, and I knew whose fault it was! She would speak to me only of Mary, endeavour by every way to give me that hope to which I turned a deaf ear, or which I sternly asserted was but a mockery to offer me.

One of the chief missions she had purposed in coming to the Ferry Inn was to nurse my wife as the one faithful daughter left her; but Janet interposed, and with a fierceness provoked by opposition, would not allow her entrance to the chamber. Janet seemed worn out herself by constant watching; the only sleep she obtained was by fitful snatches in her chair at the bedside; food or drink was hard to press upon her. She was a woman whose soul was in my wife's recovery, and who strove for it, fought for it, and would have no interference. More than once she had differed with the doctor's advice, and adopted some little change of her own, which was always for the better—her rule was absolute in the sick-chamber.

From the chamber I was no longer debarred. I had forced my way in, and taken up my silent watch beside the invalid. She had lost all consciousness then of passing things—neither my face nor

Janet's did she recognize. She lay and tossed on her bed, and raved of things incomprehensible to me, but which I noticed, more than once, made Janet start, as though they were allusions to that past in which I had never shared. My name, her brother, Ellen, Janet, even her first husband's, were constantly upon her lips; in her fevered world our shadows, doubtless, pressed upon her, and would allow no rest. To these ravings I paid no attention; I was content to watch her, to hold her hand in mine, to fancy, more than once, that her eyes *did* beam with a recognition of me, and that there were times even when she knew I kept my constant vigil there.

They interfered at last with me—Janet and the doctor. They told me that my presence there distracted Mary, and that whilst she remained excited I must add to her wild fancies. They spoke of greater peace to her when I was absent; they reasoned with me on the folly of thus watching her; they allowed me but a passing glimpse of her, once or twice a day; and forced me to my mother's love and care, as though I were the child again who needed them. All this was for my own sake, I learned afterwards; but they played their parts well, and deceived me.

A servant from Nettlewood House came every morning to inquire after the health of Mrs. Gear, but the brother did not face me, or betray, by his presence at the Ferry, any undue anxiety for his sister's welfare. Mrs. Ray was much more excited by the news; she came every morning in the carriage to the door of the Ferry Inn, and asked for me. The first words were generally,

"Don't say, she isn't better this morning, now?"

"No better," was my answer.

"I want to see her—I must see her, mind you!"

"Presently. I have spoken to Janet, and she will have no visitors in the sick-room yet awhile."

"If she's going to die, I must see her," she said; "and Janet shan't keep me out. Where is that woman?—can't she send a civil message to her betters?"

Janet appeared one day, and quite a war of words ensued between these women—Mrs. Ray demanding admittance to Mary's side, Janet sternly refusing it.

"Mind you," began Mrs. Ray, "I will see her. I'll creep up the stairs some of these fine mornings."

"Ye'll stand a chance o' bein' flung doon 'em, Mrs. Ray."

"You lay a finger on me, if you dare!"

"I'll lay ten."

"You were allus an imperent woman, but you ought to know better, now I'm a lady and keep my carridge."

"Ye're Mrs. Ray still," was the disparaging reply.

"I'm Mary Gear's friend, remember that," said Mrs. Ray becoming excited, and shaking one gloved fist from the window. "We are the best of friends, and she'll be glad to see me, any time."

"When she saes thot, ye shall coom oopstairs," said Janet, drily.

She left Mrs. Ray to digest that answer, and the old woman, after considering it for some time, beckoned me to the carriage side.

"That big brute of a woman can't do your wife any good," said Mrs. Ray; "shall I come and nus her, Mr. Gear?"

"Thank you. She is in good hands."

"That Janet was allus a rough 'un—we never agreed. Mr. Gear, when may I come and see your wife, now?"

"You must ask the doctor, if you are not contented with Janet's answer."

"I'll go to the doctor at once."

She was giving orders to drive to Henlock, when, remembering something, she turned to me again.

"I'd nearly forgot that, Mr. Gear."

I returned again.

"They're going on anyhow at my place—all sixes and sevens—with the alterations, now you're sitting here, idling time away in a pot-house. I'm thinking you might save me a mite of money, by looking arter the wretches, just a little. It isn't far to come, you know."

The reproof was just enough, though far from delicately conveyed. I was but half a mile from the house; there was no necessity for my constant presence at the Inn; the alterations were likely to go wrong when my supervision was entirely withdrawn; time and money were equally being wasted.

"I'll come to-morrow," said I wearily.

Mrs. Ray brightened up at this, and forgot her disappointment in being excluded from my wife's apartments.

On the morrow I went, and the change from the listless inaction of the past week did me a certain amount of good. There had been some blunders committed in my absence, and, setting myself to rectify them, distracted, for a while, my thoughts from the one subject which separated my interest even from Ellen, and the world.

I began to entertain a faint hope that, after all, fate would not sweep away everything I loved and cared for—That Mary, by God's help, would be restored to bless my life again.

The doctor spoke hopefully, the following day, of her recovery; the fever was abating—she had slept long and quietly the night preceding—she was less restless in the morning. This good news I took to Mrs. Ray, who strangely anxious about her, always made her appearance in the grounds immediately I arrived. The daughter, Letty, I saw but seldom.

"I'm glad of it—I'm glad of it," said Mrs. Ray, rapping her stick on the ground. "Good lor! to think that I should have ever been glad of Mary Zitman getting better! I prayed that she might die, once," she added, hoarsely.

Seeing me shrink from her, she said,

"In the old times afore I got rich; when Letty and I struggled hard to live. It's different now I'm comfor'ble—not that I'm much happier, but I'm comfor'ble—very! I'm getting awfully old though—and, oh! the drefful swimmings in my head. I shall flop out of the world all of a heap, mind you—and it worries me to think o' that. When may I see your wife, now?" she added suddenly.

"Very shortly, I hope."

"I didn't have a very nice dream about her last night—I thought she got a little better, just to deceive people, and then went off in a flash."

"That will do—no more of that!" I cried.

"I can't rest—oh! Mr. Gear, I shall never rest until I've seen her," she said. "You will try and get over that brute of a woman, with the man's voice, won't you, now?"

"I'll do my best for you."

The next day there came real hope—the hope that we could understand, and thank God for. My mother, ever a sensitive woman, burst into tears—I was unsettled, and could do nought that day but wander up and down the water's side.

The fever at the brain had left Mary—but she was very weak, and it was necessary that still greater care than ever should be exercised.

Her first wish was to see me, and, with Janet's watchful eyes upon us both, I was allowed to approach her bed side.

"My poor Canute, this has been a hard trial to you!" she whispered.

"Followed by a great blessing, Mary."

"I am glad to come back to life again for your sake."

"Ah! what would life be without you?"

"You are not angry with me now?" she asked timidly.

"Angry!"

She lay watching me with her great earnest eyes—once a long quivering sigh escaped her. She seemed summoning courage to speak of something, when the grim sentinel said,

"It's time ye war gane, sir."

"One moment, Janet, please," my wife urged.

"A moment only, then."

"Ellen"—she whispered—"has she been heard of?"

I shook my head.

I saw her face become a shade more pale—more of an ashen grey—and then Janet had thrust me aside, and was holding a glass of water to her lips.

"If ye want to kill her, Mr. Gear," she grumbled, "ye ha' better stay a leetle langer noo."

But every hour Mary gathered some degree of strength—in a few days it was promised that I should sit with her an hour or two, and that seemed to give her courage, and me composure. But when the

time arrived, though she was strong enough to bear my presence at her side, I saw the shadow of a new trouble on her face the while. There was a concentrative thought impressed upon it; it amounted almost to an unhappy look!

Janet would not leave us together, although I very plainly intimated that her absence would be preferred.

"Ye'll get talkin' o' the auld story, and I'll na ha' it yet. Ye twa thegither need an' awfu' lot o' watchin'."

Mary smiled faintly.

"If it had na' been for the watching, what would have become of me, Janet?"

"Hech! that's doubtfu'."

"We have to thank this dear old faithful friend with all our hearts, Canute."

"With all our hearts!" I echoed, warmly.

"Naethin' to thank me for," said Janet, "ain't I boond to ye—wadna I wark for a Vaughan at any time, in any trooble? I'm strang, and there's na wark in the warld hard eno' to beat me doon."

"You will change places with my mother now?" I suggested, "she is very anxious to relieve guard, now and then, Janet."

"I'll see the lassie on her feet fust," said Janet, "afore I leave the Ferry Inn. I dinna mind yer mither cooming and sitting here an hoor or twa, weel I get a leetle rest, but she munna stand atween me and the lassie I've brought back to leef."

"She does not wish that, Janet."

Janet was still jealous of intruders; she kept her watch, honest and vigilant, and did not speak of returning to Nettlewood House. Hope for me grew more strong—the dark clouds round *my* life at least, rolled slowly back, although closer to me came the mystery of Ellen's disappearance, the shame of Ellen's flight. In the good time when Mary would be strong again, there was that story to follow to the end, there was Ellen to discover and bring back, a penitent to her mother's arms. If she had fled to a greater sorrow in her escape from a home made wretched by her husband's conduct, there was a love strong enough to seek her out, and cast a veil over the guilty retrospect.

I was thinking of Ellen when I met her husband at Mrs. Ray's. It was a characteristic meeting, and showed how much further apart we had taken our positions since he brought the worst of news to me. We bowed very stiffly, but made no pretence of friendship by hand-shaking.

"To remember that I was his wife's brother was not to add to the intensity of his affection for me," was his own confession.

Mrs. Ray, her daughter Letty, and he, were in the grounds when I arrived; they had been inspecting the exterior of the new library, at which the men were working busily.

Mrs. Ray turned to me with her old eagerness.

"Better—again?"

"Yes, much better, thank you."

"And I may see her to-night?"

"To-morrow morning, perhaps, in Janet's presence, if you don't object to it."

"I'd rather see her in the devil's!" was Mrs. Ray's emphatic comment. "Why, Janet?—allus Janet? Don't the woman sleep at all?"

"She rests in the evening, whilst my mother relieves guard."

"*She* seems a decentish, good-tempered body," said Mrs. Ray. "Why don't you bring her up to tea with me? She'd be society to me—my darter isn't worth much, goodness knows."

She looked at Letty, who laughed and said:

"By-and-bye, I shall be better company, mother. Keep your new trust in me, just for a little while."

The tone of voice was new—the manner was new likewise. Looking at Letty Ray more intently, it struck me that her face was brighter and more handsome—that the heaviness thereon had vanished in a great degree. It had been a face impressed with a sombreness that was chilling once.

"Oh! you're to be trusted in most things, or you wouldn't be here," was the rough rejoinder to Letty's last appeal.

Meanwhile, Herbert Vaughan, who had wandered a little apart from us, and had looked over the terrace to the lower garden, and the water below that, returned to us after some little hesitation.

"I will bid you good-bye, now, Mrs. Ray. Have you any commands in London for me?"

"If you could think of that Cashmere. I should like a real Cashmere round my shoulders afore I die, sir."

"I will not forget it."

"And Pipp's Patent Medicine for swimmings in the head—my daughter read it in the *Cumberland Journal*. You'll think of Pipp's?"

"Oh! yes."

He looked hard at me, and addressed me for the first time.

"I am going to London, Mr. Gear, on very painful business, which you may possibly guess."

"Have you heard from Ellen?" I inquired.

"No—I have not attempted to hear," he replied, still forcing his eyes to swerve not from my own. But it was an effort, and he lowered his glance at last. "Still my business concerns *her*. When I return you will have left here, and in all human probability we shall not meet again. For my sister's sake I may regret this; but you have misunderstood every action of my life, and my ways are not your ways. For that sister's sake, let me at least wish you a prosperous career in life."

"Thank you," I answered.

He shuffled with the toe of one boot in the loose gravel—then looked up at me again.

"Shall we part friends?"

"Whosoever's enemy you may have been, at least you have not studied to injure me, I think," I answered. "But——"

He did not wait for me to conclude. He extended his hand frankly towards me, saying:

"You do me a tardy justice, Mr. Gear, and I thank you. Good day."

"But my sister Ellen stands between me and all thought of friendship," was my answer. "I cannot understand you; I may have misjudged you, but you walk in a darkness which is impenetrable to me."

I did not take his hand; I turned away. Something at that moment filled me with a horror of him; I remembered in that moment Ellen's unhappiness, his sister's unhappiness before Ellen's time, a hundred incidents which shadowed forth evil in his silent, stealthy life. There had been a cause for Ellen's flight, Janet had confessed, and that man had fostered it.

He looked after me a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, and turned away with Letty. He and Mrs. Ray's daughter went side by side together round the house, leaving the old woman to hobble after me.

"You don't like him?" Mrs. Ray asked.

"Can I be expected to admire him very much?"

"You take your sister's part—well, it's sperited. But I never took very kindly to your sister, though I liked her style of doing things."

"It matters not," was my short reply.

"She was uncommon fond of making game of me behind my back, and taking off Letty, too. I've heard it from twenty people. She no more cared who she told, than who she offended. So she came to grief."

"We need not speak of her, Mrs. Ray. It is a subject that pains me."

"Let's talk of Mary."

"One moment," I said, "I am a curious man, and your daughter's manner perplexes me. Why has she made a friend of Mr. Vaughan?"

"I don't know," the old woman said, angrily; "because I asked her not, I spose—because I'm sharp enough to see all that he's got in his brain at work. It's a great honour to the likes o' us, but I—I don't like it. He's an unlucky man, and oh!—it's an unlucky house!"

"But—but he is still a married man."

"He's agoing to London on law business—to take steps for a divorce. There's no doubt of his getting it, he says, and then I—I think he'll want to marry Letty."

A divorce! The whole story laid bare in its hideous details, for scandal-mongers to gloat over for awhile until the novelty was somewhat worn. *Her* name held up for bad men's ribaldry, and good

men's scorn, and the shame on us—the Gears—burned in a little deeper by publicity. Well, if the story were true, he was justified, and true or false, I felt powerless to act. Beyond me there was not one clue to find her—if she had been innocent, I thought, a little bitterly, she would have written to us, or have made some sign.

When I went away a few minutes afterwards, Vaughan and Letty were still lingering about the grounds. The courtship was an early one, and he was a married man yet; the days were early too for Vaughan to think of love again—was the night coming on so fast that neither could loose time, and had the lives of Mary Zitman and Ellen Gear read no warning to this new heiress, this easily mistaken woman?

I remembered that Mrs. Ray walked by my side as far as the front gate—she had hooked herself to my arm, and it was difficult to shake her off, after that manœuvre.

"When's Janet going home?" she asked.

"Shortly, I believe."

"And she does rest a little bit now—in the evening. If it wasn't for the night air, and the swimmings, I would try and see your wife before that day or two you spoke of."

"It's against the rules."

"What rules have *I* ever respected?" she murmured, as I left her clinging to the gate, and looking grimly, almost sorrowfully after me.



CHAPTER XI.

A WINDING-SHEET IN THE CANDLE.

THAT afternoon I obtained permission of Janet to see Mary again. The stern custodian relaxed the severity of her rules when Mary's voice interceded for me, when Mary spoke confidently of strength to bear my presence now.

"Ye ha' doon her gude by comin'," said Janet to me, "and if ye wull na talk too muckle, and let me watch ye baith aweel, I'll na stand in the wa'."

So I sat by Mary's side that afternoon, and talked in a low tone of the better times and brighter days before us—nothing of the shady side of life, of the sorrows that *must* haunt us till we lived the

mystery down. I did my best to speak of things foreign to the past—which she had always dreaded—to dwell on the success of the firm of Sanderson and Gear, to speak of the old partner's solicitude for Mary's health, of my mother's love and anxiety concerning her.

Mary listened with her thin hand in mine, smiled at my weak efforts at pleasantry, was very happy to know that I was near her, to feel that her getting stronger made *me* so much happier. But there was the look to which I have already alluded on her face still; the strange concentrative look which nothing could soften, which told of a world wherein she lived a separate existence, and on the confines of which I only lingered. I had attempted once to force my way within it, and here was the result in this poor stricken invalid; I had despised the barriers in my way, and in dashing at them with my brutal strength, had struck her down instead! Then she looked at me at times so strangely; the look chilled me, it presaged much, or my excited fancy read much from it. It said to me—

"The days of health and strength are coming back, but the days of confidence between us never. Never together man and wife with one thought in common; the past forbids it, my fear of you and your happiness"—she had implied this when I had sworn to know the truth—"forbid it, and I have not the courage or will to face the horror that's before me. You will love me; from this time forth you will ever be kind and gentle with me, but there will be a gulf between our inmost hearts, and my woman's love can never bridge it over!"

When Janet had dismissed me, I thought of this downstairs: close to me, with my anxiety for Ellen, was my busy speculation concerning that past on which an interdict was set. I felt amidst it all, that it was approaching nearer to my waking life, and that there would come a shock to one or both of us which would, for good or evil, rend the veil aside. It could not happen of my own free will; for Mary's sake, I dared not move one step towards it; but the end was on its way towards me, and its shadow fell across the path we both pursued.

The rain and the wind came up the valley that night again; there was no settled weather, Nettlewood way. Doors were locked and windows secured against the enemies, and Jabez tied an extra knot in his rope which secured the ferry boat to its landing stage.

"I shall be glad to get back to Borrowdale," said my mother, shivering a little when the storm was at its height, "I don't like this Nettlewood at all."

"The rain and the wind swoop down Borrowdale as well as Nettlewood to-night, mother."

"Yes, but they don't moan so. I suppose it's the mountain shutting us in at the head of the valley, and stopping the wind from a good rush. Oh! what's that?"

It was only Janet, whose head looked round the door of the best room.

"I be ga'ing to lee doon a bit, Mrs. Gear. The lassie's asleep, and the wind ha rocked her aff quietlike. She'll ring if she wants ye, she saes, but mayhap ye'll creep oop, now and then, and look at her, and leestea if she's moovin'. If she's na happy wi' ye," added Janet, rather conceitedly, "mayhap ye'll wake me."

Janet departed, and my mother stole upstairs, presently to descend again with the news that Mary was sleeping very calmly still. The rain and the wind were in full force by that time; the casements were rattling in their sashes; the doors and floorings creaked; the house rocked a little after its old fashion.

"It's like carriage wheels rattling along," said my mother, as I paused over a fugitive sketch upon which I was employing myself that evening, "but it's not likely people would be riding about Nettlewood to-night. Dear, dear me," she added, "what a place it is for noises, Canute!"

"It is a carriage approaching," I said, after a moment's pause.

My poor mother turned pale on the instant, and clasped her hands together. She had borne up well lately against her great loss, her great sorrow; for my sake she had pressed down in her own mother's heart her fear and agony concerning Ellen—but a breath disturbed her, and anything unusual she connected in a strange way with that daughter who was ever lost to her.

She looked at me, and gasped forth "Ellen," on the instant.

"No, no," I hastened to assert, "there will be no news of Ellen come to us from Nettlewood. That is beyond our hopes."

"Who is riding about to-night? What errand can bring people here? Oh, Canute, they *are* coming this way!"

I had walked to the door and opened it, when Jabez came down the passage from the back-room.

"Do you expect visitors, Jabez?"

"I doan't knoa what to expect in these toimes," said Jabez, scratching his head; "things be unsettled loike aboot here."

He gave quite a jump when the handle of a stick was applied to the panels of the outer door.

"Who's thot?" he cried. "Speak out, for the wind blows hoigh."

"It's the missus," said a gruff voice without. "Missus Ray. She would coom—she's as mad as can be."

"Where be she?"

"In the carriage, waiting for the door to open—lookee aloive!"

Jabez opened the door, and propped his sturdy shoulders against it; the wind and rain came rushing in upon us; I shut myself in the passage, and then ran to save the door of Jabez's room from banging to and waking my wife; the man who had spoken without hurried back along the wet path, and presently returned struggling under

the burden of Mrs. Ray and a large umbrella, which had turned inside out at the first attempt to raise it.

Setting Mrs. Ray against the door, and placing her stick in her hand, the man clattered off in his heavy boots again, and scrambled into the carriage to escape the wet.

Mrs. Ray looked after him.

"That's like his impudence—he'll let down the front winder, and draw the reins through 'em to save trouble, and spoil all the new lining. He's as lazy a dolt as ever lived. Jabez!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Get a sack or two to cover them poor horses," she said—"lots o' sacks. Oh, Mr. Gear, is that you?"

She limped forward, and fairly fell into my arms, the crutch-handled stick rattling on the passage floor.

"I've come to see your wife," she said; "I couldn't rest no longer. Where's that Janet?"

"Asleep."

"That's well—take me in your room a moment. I've got such a fluttering in my chest to-night."

I escorted Mrs. Ray into the room, sat her down, almost like an infant, in the chair I had vacated, returned to the passage for the stick, came back once more, closed the door, and placed the stick beside her. Her appearance then struck me for the first time. She was ghastlier than usual; her face seemed more pinched and haggard; in her eyes there was a wild excitement which was new to me—her hands that were clutching the table made the two mould candles thereon totter again.

Mrs. Ray had taken no notice of my mother, but was sitting with her bonnet awry, and her fur victorine twisted over her shoulder, staring very intently at the candle lights.

"Mr. Gear, it's here, too. It's coming true—Good Lord!"

"What has happened, Mrs. Ray?"

"Look at that there winding-sheet in the candle—ugh, it's awful!"

My mother gave a spasmodic leap in her chair; she had been ever inclined to lean to the superstitious side of things.

"A winding-sheet—good gracious!"

"Ah! you may say, 'good gracious,' mum," said Mrs. Ray, looking towards her for the first time; "they're awful things!—they brought me here to-night, old and feeble as I am. You're this young man's mother mum?"

"I am proud to say I am," exclaimed my good mother, on the instant.

"Ah!" with a weary sigh, "it's a comfort to have a dutiful child—I never know'd it—I never shall, now. A child good enough to love you, and strong enough to comfort you in your old age, and not show tempers and cross and spite you, as if you weren't the mother that brought that child into the world! Ah, me!"

She beat her wrinkled hands up and down upon the table, and stared still at the candle, which the strong draught had guttered and formed into a winding-sheet that troubled Mrs. Ray.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Gear," turning to me, "why I came here such an awful night. I was in the housekeeper's room counting the plate—I like to count the plate myself, with a candle close at my elbow, 'cause my eyes are bad—and Letty was practisin' her peanner in the drawin'-room—*she* practises hard enough, now there's a chance of marryin' that Vaughan."

"Marrying Vaughan!" exclaimed my mother.

"Don't you interrupt people," snapped Mrs. Ray; "that's the tother story, which I haven't given myself the 'fluency to come and tell *you*."

"Oh!" said my mother, completely silenced by this uncomplimentary remark.

"And I was a-counting and a-counting," Mrs. Ray continued, "and making one silver table short, which was a hard loss, and was trying to recollect who was the biggest thief I'd got in the house, when I noticed—good lor!—I noticed the awfulest winding-sheet I ever seed in my life. I was friz then, and forgot the silver table, and skreeked out, 'Mary Gear's a-goin' to die, and I haven't told her on my sins yet.' And, oh, sir! is *she* wus?"

"Better."

The old woman's explanation of her visit had frozen my own blood a little; "Mary Gear's a-going to die," had been uttered with an awful earnestness. My mother, a shade more pale, too, sat and glared at Mrs. Ray.

"She'll be wus—she'll have a relapse—I must see her to-night!"

"Impossible."

"I've come a long way on a night that few people would venture out—I've left a winding-sheet at home—I find another here!"

"But winding-sheets, Mrs. Ray," explained my mother, who seemed well versed in those articles, "only foretell death in the house wherein they are seen first."

"Get out!" said Mrs. Ray, "they tell the death of the one you are thinkin' the most on, and the most troubled about. That's Mary Gear to me—and she's ill and agoing to die. I'm as sure o' that, as I'm a living woman sitting here!"

"It's very wrong to sit there, saying such awful things," reproved my mother, "putting such awful things in my boy's head."

"So I couldn't rest," continued Mrs. Ray, deaf to the reproof; "I felt if death was about here, and I must not let an hour go by and not ask your wife to forgive me all my trespasses against her. I tried to think, at fust, that to-morrow would do, that it was an awful night, that I was old, and excitement was bad for me, but the wind said 'No' to it, and the rain said 'No' to it, and God Almighty said 'No' to it, I'm sure!"

She held her hand up to prevent all interruption, struggled with her breath, and then went on again:

"So I dressed and came out. I ordered the horses to be put to the carriage, and Miss Ray not to be disturbed at her peanner—and the noise she made herself, drowned any other;—and I came away to see your wife, sir."

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Ray, that you have put yourself to this unnecessary trouble, but——"

"But you'll let me see her?"

"I dare not, for her health's sake."

"If she were to die to-night, sir!" she entreated.

"I do not think that there is any fear," I replied; "she has been mercifully spared to me, and I entertain great hopes of seeing her well and strong again."

"Mr. Gear," she affirmed, with a persistency that was terribly depressing, "it's the snuff of the candle only brightening up a bit. She'll die, *she'll die*, I tell you!"

"I will pray not."

"And I must see her. I must whisper to her that I did her harm once, that I planned harm against her, and built upon her death and money. Oh! I must tell her that."

"I pledge you my word that she will forgive you, Mrs. Ray."

"It's a weight upon an old woman's soul, and only she can lift it off me. You're a man who won't be hard upon me, in this late hour, when I've better thoughts?"

"In a few days you may see her."

"Too late!" she affirmed; "I've dreamed all that's coming—I've seen her dead face in my sleep—it's not only the winding-sheet that's brought me here."

She continued to plead her cause—I to remain deaf to it. This old woman's excitement was deep and intense, and must arouse Mary's. There was danger to my wife, and I was her guardian to protect her from it.

My mother also began to reason with Mrs. Ray on the impolicy of the step, and the old woman listened, and stared at the candle still. After a while the listener said with a half-groan:

"Well, if it must be—if you can be so hard against me—I give up. If I were Janet, I'd fight my way, p'raps, I'm old and very weak."

She began to shake with cold, and to beat again her hands upon the table.

"I should like some brandy she murmured if it's to be got."

The brandy was in Jabez's back room, and Jabez was still outside—possibly in the carriage with the coachman, discussing Mrs. Ray's eccentricities. I went out of the room in search of the maid, or, failing the maid, to help myself to the Cognac; I had been absent two minutes, when a loud scream from my mother startled me, and made me rush back to the room I had quitted.

My mother was grasping with fright and wringing her hands.

"She's gone upstairs—she darted up and ran before I could stop her. Oh! my dear boy, what will be the end of this?"

I hurried away and ran upstairs into my wife's room. Mrs. Ray had reached the bedside, and her limbs giving way with her, had dropped her stick, and flung herself forward, catching at the coverlet with outstretched hands.

"Mary Gear—Mary Zitman," she cried, "speak to me. Tell him—tell him I'm not to go away yet!"

My wife opened her eyes, and half-turned on her side to look down upon the crouching woman. To my surprise, the sudden waking, the sudden presence of Mrs. Ray there, did not appear to alarm her, although a consciousness of strangeness of the scene appeared to be slowly impressing itself upon her.

"What is it, Canute?" she whispered.

"Nothing—nothing. Mrs. Ray has come to see you, Mary. That's all—you will not feel alarmed."

"I was dreaming of her, I think—I am not alarmed, dear."

"Tell him, I'm not to go away," screamed Mrs. Ray, "or he'll snatch me up in his arms and carry me down stairs. Tell him I'm to stop here!"

"You must not," I muttered, making a step towards her.

"I'll scream," warned Mrs. Ray, tightening her clasp of the coverlet; "I'll scream my loudest, if you dare to touch me."

"Let her stop," pleaded Mary; "it is kind of her to wish to see me, Canute, and I am strong enough to bear with her."

"But——"

"Leet her bide," said Janet's voice at my side; "what she ha' got to sae may na trooble the lassie. If there's any harm, it's doon by the bad watch ye twa hae kep."

Janet glanced from me to my mother, standing silent and trembling in the doorway.

"I have come, Mary Zitman," murmured Mrs. Ray, still in the same posture, and bestowing on my wife the old and more familiar title, "I've come before death parts you and me—sooner than either on us thinks, perhaps—to ask your forgiveness for past sins. I wished you dead once—and I—I tried to kill you!"

"No—no," answered Mary.

"You had my brother's money, and I had a miser's love for it. It seemed my right, and I was poor and wretched. I—I prayed every night that you might die, and leave me rich, when I thought you would not marry agin. It was the one prayer that I taught myself."

"Forgiven!" said my wife.

Mrs. Ray's excitement was on the increase, and I could see my wife was anxious to abridge the interview, although fearful of an abrupt termination thereto. Janet, with folded arms, stood by my side, intensely watchful.

"James Baines—your brother's man—and I had a long talk together at last—in the very room downstairs I've run away from. God forgive me! but I promised him a thousand pounds when you were dead, knowing he was a villain who never studied life much. I tempted him, and he watched you—plotted against your life—opened your window when you were asleep, that God's air might turn murderer against you, too—he was my tool and he worked on in the dark."

Mary closed her eyes—I could see the red blood mantling her face and neck.

"Janet," I whispered, "this must cease now."

"It's a' doon—the warst be oot," muttered Janet.

"You don't say 'forgiven,' unto that!" Mrs. Ray screamed, with a vehemence that alarmed us all. "You're going to die, and leave me accursed. Oh, Mary Zitman! that'll be on earth and in heaven, too—and I'm sorry for the past—I'd die—to—wipe it—all—away!"

"Forgiven," whispered my wife, opening her eyes again. "The past is over—Canute and I have outlived it, and are happy in forgetting it. My poor misguided woman, I pray that God will forgive you, as I do."

"As you do!" she cried, seizing Mary's hand, and then dropping it, and falling forward suddenly. "As—YOU—do!"

There was a long silence, broken by Janet making two strides towards Mrs. Ray, leaning over, and then lifting her up in her arms.

"Lie doon, Mary moine, and dinna think ony mair o' this," said she. "She hae fainted, as I kenned she wud lang since. I'll carry her doon, and gie her some coold water. Mrs. Gear, wull ye stay and sooth the lassie—Mister Canute, I'm thinking ye'd better coom doon a minit and help me."

She bore Mrs. Ray into her own room in lieu of descending the stairs. She had placed her on the bed, and was standing on the landing waiting for me, ere my lingering steps had brought me from the room.

"Close the door," she said, to me.

I closed the room door, and Janet laid her hand upon my arm.

"Ye can bear a shock—but it's awfu' sudden-like. We maun keep it frae the lassie, for a weel."

"Keep what?" I exclaimed.

"She came just in time—Lord be gude to her!" said Janet, not answering my question. "She's dead!"

CHAPTER XII.

MARY'S SUSPICION.

WE kept the secret of Mrs. Ray's death from Mary. Her sudden presence at my wife's bedside, and the revelation she had made there had been sufficient shock for Mary to stand up against. There was no need to tell her all that had happened afterwards—there was no good to follow it.

She came *just in time* as Janet had said. The secret had lain heavy with her; she had long struggled with it; more than once it had hovered on her lips in the days of that affluence which she had inherited by my marriage. With less to covet, the grievous sin that had led her to grudge the life of her brother's widow had tormented her; her desire for Mary's respect or friendship had induced her to seek us out in our home at Borrowdale, and tempt us once more to Nettlewood.

Mary knew nothing of the death following swiftly on Mrs. Ray's confession—of the surprise and horror of the daughter, who betrayed more regret and love than might have been anticipated—of the inquest, and the stately funeral *cortège* which bore the old woman's body to Henlock, and left Letty Ray alone and unprotected in the great house I had planned.

Fortunately, Mary suffered no relapse, though the shock of Mrs. Ray's revelation possibly retarded her progress to convalescence; for a day or two she appeared to pause and make no further advance in health; then signs of amendment were evident once more, and day after day witnessed in her some new change for which I was ever grateful.

She gained strength, although care attacked her by the way and strove to keep it back. Thought, deep and besetting, which had no mercy on her, but sowed lines in her fair white forehead, and gave a new character to her countenance. The past would not go back, that past which verged on the present, least of all. There was an embarrassment in her manner towards me; at times a chance word would bring back the scene in the room beneath her own, and she would glance at me with a look half timidity, half of alarm, which made my heart sink.

For there were times when I believed her old implicit trust could never return—that beneath an affection which would not be likely to diminish, lay a fear that I might cease to love her, or once again, with harsh vehemence, demand an explanation of all that was

mysterious to me. When we went down stairs for the first time, my arm supporting her, I felt her tremble and pause on the threshold of the room where I had charged her with deceiving me.

"This room?" she said, in a low voice.

"For a little while, dear, till you are strong enough to go back to Borrowdale."

"Ah! that dear old home!—how glad I shall be to see it again. There is not one bitter thought connected with it yet."

"Yet, Mary!" I said, half reproachfully, "there shall be no bitter thought to dim its brightness hereafter."

"I hope not," she murmured, still doubtful.

"Over our marriage felicity has burst one storm—the first and the last; say the author of that is forgiven, dearest, and trust in him ever for the sunshine to follow."

"You are all that is kind and forbearing, but—the *past*!"

"We shall live it down!"

"We cannot—it is beyond our power. Closer and closer to us every day it comes. Canute, there is no resisting it."

I turned the conversation; in the early days she must not brood over the unalterable. When she was stronger, there would come fresh pursuits—I prayed fresh ties. I spoke that evening of the home at Borrowdale, read her a letter from Mr. Sanderson, concerning the care he took of it, counted the days between the present and our return, and brought my mother also to the rescue.

I was bright and cheerful in her presence—beyond it, I was becoming more grave and stern with every day. I was inactive, and Ellen was away; Ellen whom I might rescue, if chance—or something greater than chance—threw her once more in my path. On my stern musings, Mary would, at times, as she grew stronger, suddenly intrude, and then it became her turn to draw me from the groove in which my dark thoughts ran. So we were both altering—perhaps both aging. After all, I thought, at times, a little morbidly, was it possible that man and wife might become estranged by this cruel divergence of thought—that as the day and months rolled on, and these thoughts grew upon us, might not the forbidden ground on which we dared not intrench, set us still more apart? We were not *one*; she had her secret from me; I was perplexed concerning Ellen, and could not see her figure looming mid the darkness wherein she had vanished so completely.

These thoughts or some such thoughts, were distressing my wife, I felt assured, when she seemed strong and well again a month after Mrs. Ray's death; when Janet, with many injunctions to be careful, and not think too much, had returned to Nettlewood House; when Mrs. Ray's death had been reported to her. When my mother had gone away to Borrowdale to prepare our home for our reception, the thought was heaviest, and would have borne her down again, had she not by an effort faced it, and feared less the past than losing me.

I was sitting at the table in the room where we had quarrelled—if quarrelling it can be called—turning listlessly over the numerous sketches with which my portfolio was filled. It was evening and Mary was absent—only that day, my mother had left for Borrowdale. Suddenly, at my feet, Mary was sitting looking up at my face. She had entered noiselessly, and had glided into that position, crossing her hands upon my knees.

“Canute, dear, that has grown a very grave face lately.”

“No, Mary. I will not own that.”

“It is not the face of the man who wooed and won me,” she said, sadly, “there will never come again, the old frank, fearless looks to it.”

“I am only fearing for Ellen, Mary—not for our future happiness.”

“Oh, Canute,” with an impulsive outburst that alarmed me, “we shall never be happy again—not truly happy, as in the dear old days.”

“Where there is much perplexity, dearest, there can never be content. But I am looking forward—building on the future.”

“What do you see there?”

“The child I nursed upon my knee, and whose absence breaks her mother’s heart. The child who, however wilful was never hard to turn by the right word, from the wrong road. A child with a heart full of love for those who loved her. She will come back to us.”

“Never!”

Her hands were clasped upon my knee still, but her gaze upturned to me, was trebled in its intensity of earnestness. Her face was full of fear, and yet of something more than fear—of a courage to face all, in the new impulse that had brought her to my side.

“Never, Mary?” I exclaimed, chilled by her emphatic response.

“Canute,” she said, earnestly, “I have made up my mind to face the past, rather than lose you. I cannot set against my fear of *him*, my love for *him*, your love, and God’s anger at my silence. I have struggled hard to keep my own suspicions back, to see with you in the future some brightness, to believe that all is well—will work well—and that I am only a foolish woman weighed down by wicked thoughts. But I—I must tell you!”

“Well, it is best.”

“I have been thinking much of Mrs. Ray, of her struggle with the past, too—of her confession to what foul depths a love of money can drive one covetous and cruel. Oh, that money! on all my life its shadow has fallen on me—never more dark and dense than now! Canute,”—clasping my hands in hers—“will you bear with me?—for my sake, will you keep my secret till the truth is revealed, or my fears are proved but the follies of a demented woman.”

I drew her from her crouching posture to my arms, to shield her there against the past so close upon her then.

“Courage, Mary—we have a right to share each other’s secrets

and cares—we shall be stronger by these confidences I have not sought, but which, shut from, have made me more wretched than I dared to own to you. But what has Ellen to do with all this?—why steps she in between the past and you? When we meet her——”

Her arms tightened round my neck, and her eyes looked into mine—eyes full of horror that transfixed my soul.

“We may meet her in heaven, Canute, if God is good to us,” she said slowly; “we can meet her nowhere else!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE PAST.

It had flashed across me in the dim uncertainty; it had been whispered in the turmoil of action following Ellen's disappearance; in the midst of other fears that great and ghastly one had come without an effort of my own, and kept a place beside me. I had tried to live it down; I had thought to keep it at arm's length, amongst the intangibilities which encompass a man, unable to stir hand or foot, and yet pining to act for one in tribulation.

In my heart, with all the facts against her, I had thought it more probable that Ellen should die, or seek death, rather than she should fly to shame for solace. More than once I had prayed that she might be dead, rather than the partner of guilt with Wenford.

And yet, thinking and praying thus at uncertain intervals, I could not keep a host of thoughts from pressing closer to my reason—a phalanx that destroyed the wilder theory of Ellen's innocence, and left a portion of her shame with me.

When my wife had given vent to her own suspicions, a sudden revulsion seized me in the first icy moments following her avowal. Ellen's guilty flight with Wenford, a trampling under foot of God's laws, and her own purity and honour—all better than a death sudden and unprepared for, a coward's blow struck at her in the dark.

"You do think that she is dead then, Mary?"

"Yes," she answered.

"You will tell me why you think so?" I said, "ever from to-night no half confidences between us?"

"Canute, I will tell you all."

She nestled closer to me for that protection which she felt was nearer when my arms were round her—as though she feared her own life might pay the penalty of her confession. Her voice trembled very much at first, but gathered strength as she became excited, and rang out at last with the unfaltering accents of an indignant woman.

"Canute, I believe that she is dead. In all my life I have not known a woman less likely to abjure her marriage vows, and fly the shelter of her husband's home. I believe it for two reasons: first, that her death would leave my brother free; secondly, because with that brother has ever been a lust for gold so intense and unnatural as to sweep aside *by any means* all obstacles that barred his way to wealth. Years ago when I trusted him more and feared him less, he sold his soul for money!"

"He may be a covetous man, Mary—I have known more than one

—but surely there would be barriers drawn by God's hand in his path, and he would pause before them."

"Did I think so when you found me at his feet the morning after Ellen's disappearance?" she said; "on that day I knelt to him, and implored him, for his own sake, to tell me where Ellen was. To all his story of her flight, of his despair, of Wenford's treachery, I asked where Ellen was, until he cursed me for a madwoman."

"Strange that you should doubt him more than I."

"I have seen the mask drop," she said, in an excited whisper; "against my own trust in his worthiness, has forced slowly its way the one great truth of his gigantic villainy. There, I have said it—I have owned it to you, as I owned it once to Janet years ago."

"And Janet—"

"Believes in him still—will set all down to the morbid fancies which have distressed me many years. All this to comfort me perhaps, to shut her eyes against the wickedness of him whom she has loved from his cradle-side."

"But Ellen's letter—Wenford's letter?"

"I must speak more of them presently," she said with a shudder, "of my reasons for believing them forgeries. Oh! Canute," she cried passionately, "I am sacrificing Herbert for my husband's love—I who thought to die with never a word against him to escape me."

"Words will not injure him, and if he be all that you suspect, for Ellen's sake, to afford a clue to my unhappy sister's disappearance, for the sake of honour, justice, even the lives of others, you have a right to speak."

"I think so," said she, gathering courage; "now listen to me, and tell me if I have been suspicious all my life—if in my heart I have wronged him. Years ago, Janet told me that I understood him not, that my own nervous fancies conjured up horrors which had no real foundation—that for some actions of his own, which were not to be excused, I never made sufficient allowance—that all my life I have played a cruel part towards him. If you will think so too, I shall be ever after this the happiest of women!"

She paused, and raised her head from my shoulder to look steadily across the room, with one white hand pressed to her bosom, as though the phantoms of the past were ranging themselves before her, and she had scarcely found courage to face them at the last. The past was a grim retrospect, but she went upon her backward way for my sake and for Ellen's.

"Let me hurry on my story," she began; "I need not dwell upon my single life, scarcely on my married. You know that Mr. Zitman returned to his native place a wealthy man; a man much older than myself, a hard stern being, with that love of money ingrained in him which we have seen in his sister, Mrs. Ray. He was a rich man, who sought my father's house, who, after a while, made it almost his home, who eventually asked me to become his wife. To that marriage step

by step, forced forwards as it were by my father and my brother, I was led. They made my home wretched, my life miserable, and I married Mr. Zitman to escape them, God forgive me!"

"Why dwell on this?" I said. "Why do I sit here listening to this—to you who are not strong and well as I could wish yet? To-morrow——"

"I am strong enough," she interrupted, "I am going through my task now, bravely and fearlessly. The guilt of my long silence is oppressive, and I must have your old love back, your old trust and confidence in me. Mr. Zitman did not make me happy—after my father's death, when my brother, to whom he had taken a fancy, was living under the same roof with us, I was less happy still—I was watched, mistrusted, treated as a cypher in the house to which I had been lured. In that house, I first suspected Herbert. He played a double part—professing friendship and love to both, and yet setting one against the other, surely and insidiously. To me, he spoke much of the advantages accruing from the death of my husband—of my young widowhood, and the days of freedom that would follow it—he played the tempter till I bade him silence, and shut my ears for ever against the cruel ideas which he had given birth to. At this time my husband went to London on business with my brother—he left in good health and strength; and *he died within the week!*"

"But——"

"Patience, patience!" she cried; "all is suspicion—there are no facts—I cannot reason! I discovered, afterwards, that a day or two before his death, Herbert had forged my husband's name to a cheque for two thousand pounds, and that discovery was imminent—I know that he returned triumphantly to Nettlewood, to congratulate me on my liberty, and to eventually exercise over me a tyranny greater than my married life had witnessed. Still, even then, I did not think him the murderer of my husband, until I found how deep a schemer every action proved him. There came a time when Wenford sought to marry me—I believed that man loved me after his wild fashion, and that over his better nature I had some influence then, though I dare not trust my future with him, though I never dreamed of loving him. My brother wished that marriage—threatened me if I rejected him, made my home a house of bondage, in the hope that I should leap towards Wenford for escape, used every means, every cruel artifice, to make me call that man my husband."

"Was this reasonable?"

"The money would have passed to the Rays, and he was professing love to Letty Ray at that time—if I had married Wenford, Letty would have been his wife within the week. They were whispering in the village of his attentions to the girl, when I told Wenford it was beyond my power to love him. And then——"

She paused, with her face more ashen still, with a look upon it that made me fear for her, and accuse myself for listening thus so patiently,

and yet which held me by a spell that was irresistible to break through.

"And then he schemed for my life—to cast me down by my own nervous fears, or failing that, *to poison me.*"

"This can't be, Mary. He was never so great a villain—this must have been a delusion."

"They tried to make it appear so, when I was on my guard—when I had confessed my fears to Janet, and Janet had affected to laugh at them. I believed, then, that my husband had died by Herbert's hands—and that my life was unsafe, if he thought of marrying Letty Ray. I knew that he was a forger—that he had forged my name since my husband's death—that whenever he required money he signed my name in the cheque-book, and relied upon his sister's pride to shield him—I knew that we had quarrelled, and I had warned him of his crimes—I knew that he was dangerous, and had no mercy on those who kept him down. Janet—my own trusty watcher—would not hear of my suspicions, and laughed at them before me. But, Canute, I was watching in my turn then, and in the library I heard once, Janet and my brother at high words. She was taking my part then—she warned him that if he thought or dreamed of evil, she would denounce him if I came to harm—she spoke of her love for him, her hope in him yet, her doubts if all that I suspected could be true, but she told him that he was mistrusted, and—I think she saved my life! Poor Janet, she will ever think the best of him through all—she believes in him yet, though his own sister has lost all love and faith."

"A hundred suspicions float above us both, but there is nothing tangible to grasp at. Devoid of principle, a forger and a villain, still there is no proof of darker, deeper crimes."

"Those doubts were the faint gleams of light upon the path before I met with you," she said, "they crossed the darker ones, and kept me wholly from despair—at times, I tried my best to believe in them."

"Is there anything more to say, Mary?"

"Only this, that my fear of him became more intense as I grew weaker; that, in striving to think my past suspicions the faint shadows of a dream, I felt my reason giving way, and right and wrong becoming inextricably confused. My one hope was to live apart from him—hence the scheme for a new house, wherein I could feel safe from harm. By that time I had assured him that I should never marry, that I would be content to live away from him, and allow him an annual income which would satisfy even his rapacity, and on those terms he was content to let me go—nay, glad to part with me. I did not know then what was coming from the distance to make my life a brighter one—I did not believe in any one sacrificing all for me, and loving me for my own wilful self."

"You had lived in an enervating atmosphere, and lost all confi-

dence in honest hearts," I said, pressing her closer to me. "At least, this is a brighter time for you."

"It was, until I feared that your love was fading away also,"

"Never that. I was disturbed concerning the grim past which haunted you—nothing more, my Mary."

"It is an awful past—judge how it has affected one ever weak and delicate. Is there anything more to say, Canute?" she asked, "of the competition scheme—of my brother's wish to constitute you the architect—of his search for you in London—of his own attraction towards your sister—an attraction that might have saved him and moulded his character anew, if love of money could have been set further from his heart. Canute, I believe for a time he *did* love her—until she read his sordid nature, as I had read it in the years before she met him. When he was married to her, he heard for the first time of my intention to become your wife; you remember how he hurried back here whilst you were in London—that he might work upon my fears, and my old promise to him, to break off the engagement we had formed. But, oh, Canute! your love had made me strong, and I could not regret the first promise which I had ever broken in my life, when the fairer days before me were making even the present bearable. When I stood my ground, he changed his, and perpetrated one more forgery, which made Nettlewood House his own. For Ellen's sake, I let the veil drop over his last struggle for a portion of the riches that were melting from me; and I passed from the wild life of uncertainty with him to peace and rest with you."

It was a wild story, built up of fancies and suspicions, yet verging on an awful truth. Tortured by these fancies, seeing the lowness and the craftiness of the man with whom her life had been spent, I could believe how much her mind had borne, and wonder that it had not given way more utterly. I could believe, too, in these fancies—in the depths of that stern character which knew no law save its own awful passions. This man was no common villain—he was a clever man who having made CRIME his study, had become a professor in the art. Such men had lived to shame humanity, and shock it by a felon's death. Here and there, in the grim calendar of prison annals, such men stalked, for honest folk to wonder at. He was a man trebly dangerous, for the few signs he made—every action of his life was part and parcel of some scheme which threatened evil to his victims.

"You are silent, Canute," she said; "will you tell me, if, knowing him to be a villain in one respect, I have judged him too harshly and severely in another—if I have ungenerously believed the very worst of him?"

"All is dark before us—but we will not judge him yet awhile."

"But you fear you doubt?"

"I fear for Ellen more than ever, Mary," I said. "I must find out, for her sake and my own, what has become of her."

"Yes—it must be," murmured Mary.

"This man, if he be innocent, will thank me for following the mystery to the end; if he be guilty, and would screen his guilt by blasting the fair fame of his victim, he is not worthy of your pity, and is *too dangerous to live!*"

"No—no—you will have mercy on him, at the last, Canute," she said, "for the sake of Ellen, you will not forget your wife."

"Ellen's last words were that 'the mists were closing round her. I must fight my way through them to her—or to her grave. When the broad light is upon us all again, we will think of what mercy to mete out to that man.'"

I had no thought of mercy then, but my wife's wild looks warned me to hide the bitter longing I felt to hunt Vaughan to the death. And with the mists around us all, what right had I to assume the avenger's part so soon?

"I must stay a little while longer in Nettlewood, Mary—once again postpone my return to Borrowdale. But you, if you love me, will go back and make my mother's house your home, for the few days that I shall be away from you."

"You are going into danger?"

"No—I trust not."

"For my sake you will be careful not to make my brother Herbert your enemy. Promise me that, and that you will not be very long away, and I shall have courage to part with you—if it be necessary."

"There is a stern necessity to act, and I cannot avoid it."

I had made up my mind in what way to proceed, but I spared my wife an outline of my plans. When she was away, *when she was more safe*, I would make my first step into the shadow-land wherein poor Ellen had vanished. Then, step by step to the end, swerving not to right or left until I found her in her shame or in her grave—to pity or avenge her.

There must have been signs of this set determination in my looks, for Mary's arms were round my neck again, and she whispered,

"You will think of me—you will not forget me, Canute?"

"Never."

"I fear now," she said, irresolutely, that I have done wrong—that in my selfish wish to have no clouds between us, I have confessed too much, and spoken too much against him. My doubts steal back—my old belief in him returns."

"I have said that we will not judge him yet, Mary."

At this moment the Ferry bell across the river clanged loudly—some one was anxious to reach Nettlewood.

"He has come back again, said Mary.

I drew the blinds aside, and looked out into the dark night. Jabez and his man were tramping about with lanterns in their hands. I opened the window, and called out,

‘ Who’s coming to Nettlewood, Jabez? ’”

“ Measter Vaughan, I think. Do you wish to see him? ”

“ No—not now.”

I did not draw the blind across the window, but remained there—Mary came and linked her hands upon my arm, to watch there also. We were both silent—it was a dark night, with few stars shimmering above where the secrets of all hearts were known.

Across the water in the large ferry-boat, came Vaughan at last, his hand upon the bridle of his horse, as I had seen him once before.

For the first time in my life I had watched him come towards me, as he came now. I had other hopes then; life was different with me; Ellen was a governess at home; Mary Zitman I had seen but once; life had not been turned suddenly from its silent course into a vortex of romance.

The words of Mrs. Ray came back to me, wild and ominous as though they were ringing from her grave in Henlock churchyard.

“ He is coming at us like a fate! ”

And on he came that night again, “ to pass by us unacknowledged ”—the fate that had shadowed his sister’s life and mine, and left Ellen’s hard to guess at—the fate that I was gathering strength to cope with! In the dim future stretched the battle-ground wherein he and I should meet—was Ellen lying there already, with her face upturned to the heaven that had been so pitiless?

BOOK VI.

IN SEARCH.

“Lucius, the torrent bears too hard upon me :
Justice gives way to force.”

ADDISON.

“I charge thee, keep this secret close.”

OTWAY.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST STEP.

WHEN Mary had returned to Borrowdale, I began the task, which, but for Mary's illness, I should have commenced a month ago. There was a clue to find, failing which I might return home on the morrow—discovering which might lead me many miles away. Mary took back with her a letter of mine to Mr. Sanderson, explaining my future intentions, craving his indulgence as a partner and a friend, if, for a short while, business were neglected by me. To that faithful friend I confessed my utter inability to work, and dwelt upon the fever that was consuming me to know more of her who had been spirited away. From him, in due course, I received an answer—kind and fatherly, containing much shrewd advice not to be led too far, but wishing me, as I knew he would, God speed in the task I had set myself. He thought—or rather his letter conveyed the impression—that I was full of the one hope to rescue Ellen from further sin, to test her sister's love for me by urging her to give up him who had seduced her from home; he did not know the darker shades which the story had taken since he had heard it first, or the belief that in my heart was strengthening so fast.

Fortunately I had a good excuse for lingering in Nettlewood—the library alterations were being proceeded with again; the stately heiress to her mother's possessions was anxious that all her mother's wishes should be carried out to the letter. Of that heiress I saw little; she flitted before me once or twice in her deep mourning, and seemed always anxious to avoid a conversation; when we were compelled to meet, she spoke alone of business, and appeared ever solicitous to curtail her interviews. With her new possession she had entered into a new reserve that was chilling almost repulsive; she was the lady patroness now, and I was her inferior, to be treated with cold politeness, nothing more. The old times had vanished too far back for me to intrude upon her companionship, or claim to be her friend—or else those fragments of her mother's story which had oozed out at the inquest, had rendered her reluctant to face one who was a representative of her strange sad past.

For these reasons, or others for which I did not care to seek a solution, Letty Ray held herself aloof from me. This did not disturb me, or arouse my curiosity for a while—I had but one idea, and that possessed me utterly. On the first night that I was left alone in Nettlewood, I locked the door upon my reverie, and held

silent communion with my thoughts. Until all facts were ranged calmly and methodically side by side, and I could trace, as it were upon a map, the progress of the story, till it ended abruptly like a ruin, I was powerless to act.

On the evening of the 20th of July, I saw my sister for the last time; she was troubled then, troubled at her husband's attention to Miss Ray, and unsettled at a something looming indistinctly in the background. Did she fear for her life, then? Across her startled fears was there flung, at that time, the shadow of the danger which approached her—leaving there, did that danger suddenly and swiftly fall upon her before escape was possible? If that were true, Janet could tell me, perhaps—Janet, who was in the house that night. If all that Vaughan had told me were true, there would be no difficulty in ascertaining if Mr. Wenford made preparations for flight, and if they fled away together. That last task I set myself in the first instance.

The ground was easy to work upon—a servant or two of Wenford's household were accustomed to stray down to the tap-room of the Ferry Inn, to gossip on Nettlewood matters over a mug of Jabez's ale—since Mr. Wenford's departure to appear more frequently, even smoke and drink away the day there, like servants neglectful of a house deserted by its master. More than once lately I had heard them grumbling over the hard times which left their salaries unpaid, and themselves irresolute how to proceed, and had passed them by unheeded—that day, after my wife's departure, and one of the grooms was smoking his pipe at the table on the grass-plot, I strolled from the inn towards him. I had become well known to all Nettlewood folk by this time, and his "good day, Mr. Gear," was nothing new or strange.

"What! here again?" I ventured to remark, in the first instance.

The man was full of his wrongs, and resented my observation at once.

"What does it matter where I am, sir?—there's no one to order me now the master's away, and the house is going to the dogs. Like the butler, and the coachman, and the cook, I'm waiting for my wages."

"How will you get them?"

"The creditors are down upon the place. The Larches is to be sold somewhere in London—we shall be paid out of the estate."

"And the horses?"

"Oh! they'll go with the rest, barring the one Mr. Wenford rode away on, and the one he lent Jem Baines."

"Did Baines accompany your master, then?"

"Yes. Odd to pick upon that fellow who was discharged for impudence to Mr. Vaughan, wasn't it, sir? And I was always master's favourite man—he couldn't do nothing without me once. If it hadn't a-been for that Jem Baines, I should have been along with the guv'nor in furrin parts, where he's spending his money with the lady who—oh! I beg your pardon, sir. I forgot you see."

The man reddened and looked confused. I told him there was nothing to beg my pardon about; and, fearful of arousing his suspicions by further inquiries, I left him to his pipe and ale in the sun-shine. I strolled along the banks of the lake to ponder on the result of my first step—from it had evolved more than I had dreamed of, more than I could see the reason for.

I had learned at least that James Baines—the past tool of Mrs. Ray—had accompanied Mad Wenford, and that both had left on horseback. The thought struck me then that perhaps Ellen *had* fled with Wenford, that James Baines was an accomplice and had assisted in her flight, placing his horse at the disposal of Mrs. Vaughan when she had passed from her husband's home. I tried to recollect at what hour Wenford had left Mrs. Ray's house, and recalled his strange demeanor when he stood at the door of the supper-room, and spoke of business taking him away. I remembered a gilt time-piece on the mantel-shelf chiming twelve; if he, taking advantage of Vaughan's presence at the supper-table, had seized that opportunity to set off with my sister, they would have reached Henlock before one. They would not have stopped at Henlock for an instant, but have gone on down the vale, or over the bridge at the base of the Black Gap range of mountains. Down the vale there was no village for a good fourteen miles—across the bridge and taking the car road, long and circuitous to Borrowdale, there were only a few houses dotting the road here and there, and, I believe, no place where it was likely they could have halted and refreshed or changed their horses. In all probability they would have proceeded down the Vale of Nettlewood, as far as Horley—the village already mentioned—changed horses, and gone on again. They would have reached Horley about four, and, in the dead hours of the night, must have aroused some one or other to attend to them. I would try Horley first, at least.

I set off on my fourteen miles' walk that afternoon, and reached Horley at seven in the evening.

Horley was a straggling but large village, chiefly peopled by miners, who worked at some lead mines in the district. There were two inns to Horley, and one beer-shop on the outskirts of the town beyond Horley. Surely, if there were a lady and gentleman riding through here at four in the morning they would have been seen, and their horses must have been fatigued sufficiently to require some degree of attention. I proceeded to the inns forthwith, where no news awaited me. Mad Wenford was well known to both the landlords; if he had aroused them in the early morning of the twenty-first of July, they would not have forgotten it very soon. They knew Mad Wenford—they had heard the new story connected with his name, and their memory was not likely to betray them in this instance. The landlord of the "Crown" only remembered being aroused once in the night in all his life, and that was in the old coaching days,

when there was a break down in the High Street. I went on to the beer-shop, and received no information there. Tired and dispirited, I walked back into the town, to the first inn where I had made inquiry concerning the fugitives.

I called for a mug of ale there, and took my place in a corner of the bar-parlour, and waited for the landlord's evening customers. After a while one or two straggled in: the butcher of the town for his evening glass of gin and water, and the ubiquitous parish-clerk, who haunts the parlours of all inns, country and town, and takes the easy chair and corner place.

Casually I asked of them if they remembered the twenty-first of July, or the night of the twentieth, and they stared vacantly at me, the parish-clerk asking me why I put the questions to them? I informed that I was anxious to ascertain whether any person, or persons, rode through the town whilst its inhabitants were sleeping; and the parish-clerk fancied that he was woke up out of his sleep one night in the summer, but dashed if he knew when or by what. I was a detective policeman after some one, perhaps, he asked inquisitively, and seemed disappointed when I responded in the negative.

It was his turn to put questions to me, but I balked them by snatching at a newspaper, and applying myself to its contents.

It was a Cumberland newspaper, two weeks old, and contained some scraps of local news, and a plethoric array of advertisements, directing attention to sales, and recommending quack medicines, which people had long since grown tired of in London.

By way of refuge, I was studying these advertisements, when one leaped, as it were, towards me, and startled me by its appeal to the facts I was anxious to arrive at. I had to take a firmer grasp of the newspaper to conceal the evidence of my hand shaking from the two men quietly smoking their pipes at a little distance from me. I read carefully the advertisement twice. It ran as follows:

"NOTICE.—If the parties who left two horses at Quirkett's Farm, near Horley, on the morning of the twenty-first of July last, do not fetch or send for the same, on or before the fourteenth of August next ensuing, they will be sold to pay expenses."

"Where's Quirkett's Farm?" I asked, throwing down the paper, and leaping to my feet.

"Three miles from here, I should say," said the butcher, "further down the Vale. You know the Triesdale Pass, mayhap?"

"No."

"It's close agin it—that's all."

"Thank you."

I went out of the room with my heart beating somewhat faster. The parish-clerk slapped his hand upon his knee as I went out.

"That man's after some poor fellow, I'll lay sixpence. He's sharp-set on to something."

I went through the town, and past the beer-shop again. I set

forth at a smart pace towards Quirkett's Farm—the excitement of pursuit was making my blood warm. The chase had begun, and I was entering upon it with all that energy which more than once in life had startled those who had seen me roused to action. It was a gift of God's, that perseverance under difficulties, and I thanked Him for it then. I felt that I should never give way until the end was reached, or death met me by the way.

There was no difficulty in discovering Quirkett's Farm—a low, old-fashioned, heavily-thatched building, standing at the opening to one of those wild, picturesque mountain passes in which Cumberland abounds. A gloomy scene it presented, in the twilight, with the silence of the grave around me.

I toiled up the hill towards the farm, and knocked at the stout oaken door, with the handle of my walking-cane; a short burly man, with a red face and sandy whiskers, responded to my summons.

"Your name is Quirkett?"

"The tother man who deed here wor, not me."

"This is Quirkett's Farm, at least?"

"Ay."

"In the early morning of the twenty-first of July last two horses were left here?"

"Dorm their blood!—t'eat their heads off—yes."

"Are the horses here?"

"I ha' soold 'em. I said I would—I'll tak' the reesponsibilitiee do your worst!" he shouted.

"I don't want the horses—I only wish to know why they were left here at all?"

"One had goon lame, and the other had been stooned by so many coots over the head with the boot end of a wheep—the tall mad fellow did that."

"A man and woman bought those horses?"

"No—two men."

"One a groom?"

"Ay—I theenk so—I moind some white bootins sheening in the candle-light."

"And the other a very tall man, with thick moustaches—Wenford of Nettlewood."

"I'm a new coomer, and doan't knoo Wenford of Nettlewood—and doan't woan't to knoo. Tall he wor, with moustaches like a Chaneyman. I'm oot o' pocket by these horses—ha' ye coom to pay the deeference?"

"Which way did those men go after leaving here?" I asked.

"Up the pass. Ha' ye coom——"

"Can the pass lead towards Nettlewood, or join any mountain track from Nettlewood?"

"It leads bang away to Raverdale, and I doan't knoo anything o'

Nettlewood. I've told ye so—ha' ye coom to pay the difference, now?"

"I have not," I answered; "I am in search of those two men—I am anxious to reach Raverdale to-night. How far is it?"

"Sax miles by the pass. I've a mule I can let out for sax-and-saxpence, and my boy'll guide ye for half-a-croon. He's a mighty deal o' help to the towrists that are always bothering aboot here."

"I'll have the mule."

Waiting for the mule, I conversed still further with the owner of the farm, who, despite his bombast, appeared to me somewhat relieved in mind that I had not called to claim the horses, or argue upon the difference between their keep and the product derived from their sale. I learned from him that master and groom went down the pass on foot, the master swearing volubly all the time that he was within hearing. Feeling convinced that all clue to Ellen was lost in this direction, I yet went on to Raverdale, reaching there at ten in the evening, when the houses of the early villagers were closed. A small village, with only one inn—the landlady a voluble being with an excellent memory, that treasured up every incident which had happened in her experience within the last five and forty years. She remembered the 21st of July well—the early hour at which a groom entered the inn, and had a flask filled with brandy, whilst the other man, a very tall one, passed through the village without looking right or left. She fancied it was Mr. Wenford, of whom she had heard many times, but she had only seen him once, and couldn't swear to him. Both men were very muddy about the legs, and no doubt had come from Horley by the Triesdale Pass. I slept at the inn that night, resolving to hasten back in the early morning to Nettlewood again.

I went at once to my room, to escape half a dozen boisterous tourists, who were making the parlour ring with their hearty English merriment.

Thinking over the incidents of that day, and of the result of the first step in search of Ellen, my impulse was to feel grateful that she had not fled with Wenford. Unless I had been wholly deceived, and had followed a false track, which seemed impossible, I was at least spared the shame of discovering that Ellen was unworthy of further search. Better dead than to have discovered that!

My heart sank fearfully at this thought an instant afterwards. Better dead in her youth and beauty, when life should be opening to her fair and radiant—dead by the coward's hand that struck at her when she feared no evil!

Herbert Vaughan had told me at the Ferry Inn that she had fled with Wenford. Why did he tell me that lie?—why did I feel that night, though baffled in my search, so near unto the truth he had striven so desperately to hide from me?

CHAPTER II.

JANET'S DEFENCE.

FROM the Triesdale Pass to Nettlewood there was no track, the landlady told me in the morning; she had heard of a man making a path for himself across the mountains, but no one believed the story, inasmuch as there were two ranges of hills between Triesdale and Nettlewood, and likewise a rugged gap to cross. It might be just possible, but there would be a losing of time and a considerable amount of extra fatigue.

In her new home, Ellen had taken a fancy for long mountain rambles, but it was not probable, I thought, that if she had left in the night's darkness, she would have attempted so impracticable a way, or have chosen that route at all, even to meet the man with whom it was supposed that she had fled.

I gave up the idea of that guilty flight at once. I had tracked Wenford to Raverdale; there seemed no possibility of Ellen meeting him, or a reason for meeting him there, when it was far more easy to have accompanied him at once. I set aside Wenford's departure as something separate and distinct from Ellen's disappearance. Possibly it had been planned to occur at the same time by the master schemer who had worked the mystery, and, failing other means, I might yet be forced to follow the old track and discover Wenford's whereabouts. Something more concerning the troubles of that night Wenford was aware of; he and Vaughan had plotted together for years, though Wenford might be but the tool for more skilful hands to work with.

I thought of my first journey from London, and my first meeting with Wenford; there recurred to me again the scene by the Windermere lake margin and the two figures on the bench by the lake's margin. I felt convinced now that they were Vaughan and Wenford, and that the latter had been sent to spy upon me, to gain some further clue to my character, perhaps, ere I was inducted into my post as architect to Mrs. Zitman.

It might be necessary to endeavour to find Wenford presently. I had at that time discovered sufficient for my purpose—Ellen had not fled with him. I started at an early hour for Nettlewood again, and reached the old scene of action early in the afternoon. I walked my twenty miles at a fair pace, resting but a little while upon the road, and was prepared to seize the first opportunity to act in a new direction. My heart was heavy with the sense of the foul play which had been practised; but my brain had become excited, and the spell of unrest was on me. I could not read or write—write even to my

wife that night—I could not sleep for the hundred plans that rushed at me at once, and bewildered me by suggestions how to act. I was playing a game wherein every step was danger; my own life might be at stake if I aroused suspicion of my plans. I had need to adopt every precaution in my search; he whose policy was to baffle me was in the village again, watchful and vigilant.

The next day was Sunday; I was awake early, feverish for action. The day brought no sense of rest; my pulse was irregular, my incentive to be up and stirring was a something irresistible. I, who had thought so little of Ellen whilst my wife's life trembled in the balance, who had let days and weeks pass, half believing in the reports that had been circulated against her, now begrudged every minute filtering by, wherein my purpose rusted from disuse.

I went for my old walk by the lower bank at the water's side, to sketch out my next course calmly, if it were possible. I chose the path that led towards the wall of rock which closed the Vale in, instead of proceeding down it past the Ferry.

It was seven in the morning, and there was no one stirring. The honest Cumberland folk—the few there were at Nettlewood—took a longer spell of rest on Sunday, to make up for early rising in the week. I went on slowly, passing the spot where I had knelt and dragged Letty from the water, in the early days when she was desperate with jealousy; I left on my right the mansion of Miss Ray, and stopped only at the low oaken fence that kept intruders from that portion of Vaughan's private grounds which was separated by the road-way from the house itself, and extended to the water's edge. I wound my way up to the road-way, passed between the two oaken fences, and then descended on the other side to the lake again. I noticed for the first time, with any degree of attention, a gate in the oaken fence that I passed; when I was by the water's edge, and proceeded still further on my wanderings, I wondered if Ellen had stolen from her house that night, crossed the road, passed through that gate to the lower grounds, and then taken one leap from desolation to death. The thought chilled me—but I experienced a morbid satisfaction in brooding upon it, in speculating upon its probabilities. It seemed possible, even reconcilable with her strange demeanour on that night I saw her last. Then my thoughts deepened; and it seemed also awfully reconcilable with all that I had heard of Vaughan, that he might have killed her in his passion, in his dash for the freedom that would make him Letty's husband, and have stolen out in the dark night to sink her body in the lake. I sat down on the bank and pictured it—the solemn stillness of the night, the darkness brooding over the mountain scenery, the security from all witnesses save those who looked from heaven—the figure, with its burden creeping stealthily along the house, across the road, through the gate, and down the winding path—the one splash in the deep water that ended all, and hid all till the Judgment.

I sprang up, and shook away the thought at last—it was a cruel one, it was *not* reconcilable! The plain truth seemed to me, that Ellen had left her home, not to join Wenford, but to fly from danger. Some one had crossed the Ferry that night—cut the rope of the ferry-boat—and steered across the lake—why not Ellen?

Then once again came perplexity, to make my brain dizzy with these many speculations. In the lower grounds attached to Nettlewood House was a small private boat, seldom used, but handy for anyone of the establishment who might wish to cross the lake. Why should Ellen come down to the Ferry, if she wished to gain the opposite side, when means more handy were at her disposal? Was it not more likely that Ellen adopted this course, and that her husband, missing her at a later hour, came down to the Ferry Inn, and crossed the water in pursuit of her, by the only method available to him? In pursuit of her—by which route? By the Black Gap Pass, whence the pistol-shot sounded. Who fired that pistol, and what was the result?

A picture still more grim and horrible presented itself. My heated imagination sketched the terrified woman struggling on to Engerdale by the mountain pass, and the destroyer following her. I heard the pistol-shot, and the mountains murmur of horror at the deed; I saw the woman falling forwards on her face, and the pursuer hurrying on towards her in the spectral greyiness of that night. It was a horrible but natural conclusion. My next step must be to take the Black Gap Pass, and carefully, vigilantly work my way, and search for any sign that, by God's goodness, might be left me there.

This became almost a settled conclusion with me by which to regulate all future progress. The more I brooded on the picture, the more reasonableness there seemed to be in it. What step more natural than that Ellen, fearing for her life, should attempt to escape, and by the Black Gap Pass, which she had once owned to me was a familiar road to her?—where she spent her lonely hours in musing on the hard fate that had befallen her, or in sketching the wild landscapes that were ranged round her from every point of view. In my portfolio at home was one scene from the Black Gap, drawn by her hand when the mists she feared had not wholly closed around her.

I went homewards, fixed to one idea, that Ellen had attempted the Black Gap route to Borrowdale that night—the route that led to her mother's arms, where comfort and love were to be found—and that Herbert Vaughan had followed her. Between Vaughan and Wenford some desperate scheme had been concocted, which Ellen's forethought or flight had disturbed, perhaps, and hence the chase that followed. And yet my heart sank more and more. It was a leaden weight within me; the more the impression of my new theory began to steep in upon my brain, the more heavily and laboriously my heart beat on.

If it were correct, the end was sad indeed. Vaughan had suc-

ceeded in his project, returned home by his own boat, left by Ellen on the other side of the stream, and appeared at the inn in the morning with his dastardly explanation of the mysteries of that night. I went on like a man walking in his sleep; I took no heed of passing things; I scarcely knew the route I followed; it was instinct that brought me to the Ferry Inn.

What a struggle it was to descend to every-day-matters!—to talk to Jabez of the fine morning, to sympathize with him on the few English tourists who thought Nettlewood deserving of the honour of a visit, to eat my breakfast and prepare for my walk to Henlock Church, as though there were no gigantic evil shadowing my life, and no sister to find, living or dead!

Still I prepared for Henlock Church, with a purpose inapplicable to prayer; I could not pray; I could but think of Ellen, even in God's house, and take my schemes of vengeance with me there. Had it not been for seeking a still further clue, I should have attempted the Black Gap Pass that morning, but I suddenly remembered that Janet visited Henlock Church twice every Sunday, and that she had once spoken strangely to me of Ellen's disappearance. She had never offered her own version of the little she might have heard or seen after Ellen's return from Mrs. Ray's, and she was a truthful woman, whom it was not difficult to trust. I felt that if her love for her master would stand as a shield between him and discovery, at least there was no fear that she would betray me to him.

I went to Henlock at an early hour, but met her not by the way. On the road an open carriage, containing Miss Ray the heiress, whirled by me, with Herbert Vaughan cantering by its side, looking as amiable and happy as though he had lost no wife, or known no shame. Miss Ray did not see me, she was listening attentively to all that her attendant had to say, and it was only Vaughan who bestowed upon me the faintest bend of the head by way of salutation.

It was a mockery of worship with me in the church that morning the words of the reverend pastor floated unheeded by, were empty echoes reverberating amongst the rafters of the roof. I sat like a dullard, looking straight before me, at times so forgetful of church forms as to remain sitting whilst the congregation stood, and then leaping up suddenly and startling my neighbours. When Janet arrived, full half an hour late, my attention was directed towards her—she became the sole object of my careful watch.

Whether she were more abstracted that day, also, or whether it were here her usual manner, which I had not thought of noticing before, certain it was that her demeanour at church was not much more reverent than my own. She sat in the free seats, that were ranged in the middle aisle, from the doors to the clerk's desk, taller by a head and shoulders than the young and old woman between whom she had taken her place. A remarkable object at any time—at that time, to me, one of unusual interest.

It was a hard, bony face, to which my attention was directed—a face full of stern thoughts, which gave it character, even rendered it repellent. She was thinking little of the prayers that were being read to her—much that disturbed her heart was expressed in the stony look before her. To me she looked older and more worn—I fancied that her hair was greyer, and not arranged with that degree of tidiness for which she had ever been remarkable. Hers had been a long watching of my wife, and had tasked her, perhaps, beyond her strength. Once the pew-opener whispered to her as she passed, but Janet did not heed her until her arm was touched, then she started and took the hymn-book which had been proffered her, with a scowl that might have annihilated the old woman for her uncalled-for attention.

All that morning I watched Janet Muckersie. During the sermon I observed that she looked more than once towards Herbert Vaughan, sitting by Miss Ray's side, an acknowledged suitor, ere he was free to talk of love. That propinquity to Letty Ray was my one distraction of the morning—he sat there an insult to me, a slur upon the fair fame of her he had traduced. But the indignation faded away, and the one thought came back, that the end was afar off and in darkness, and I had scarcely made one step towards it. The sermon was over, and they were streaming out of church at last, three-fourths of the congregation turning towards Henlock, the remainder proceeding back to Nettlewood. I went out with the rest in the same dream-like fashion, saw the carriage of Miss Ray rattle away, and Herbert Vaughan take the horse from his groom—a new groom—and ride after it, and then looked round for Janet, whom I detected striding homewards along the Nettlewood Road.

I set forth after Janet; I was a fast walker, but I found considerable difficulty in overtaking her. She strode on like a life-guardsmen, swinging her long arms by her side at every step, and making rapid progress. I ran a little way at last, and came up with her by those means.

“Good morning, Janet.”

She gave a little jump at my propinquity, and said,

“Measter Gear—ye started me.”

“Did you not expect me at Henlock Church to-day?”

“I thoct ye mayhap had gane back to Borrowdale after the lassie. She be too narvous, too delicate to leave alane there—she be too fond of worry as to where ye'll be, and what ye'll be doing.”

“I shall be going back next week—after all, it is only a day's walk across the mountains.”

“Ay!—that's true.”

“Before I go, will you be a friend to me, Janet? I have come to Henlock to day to ask that question.”

The woman looked steadily at me. I could see the face take a

shade degree more hardness, as though she suspected treason against her master's house at once.

"I am a freend of a' who luvè my Mary," she said, however; "to ye, Measter Gear, I hope alwa' to be aue, wi'oot bein' a traitor to my ain sel."

"Now my wife is well, I am anxious about my sister Ellen—I can know no happiness, Janet, until the mystery of her disappearance is explained. Will you help me?"

"How can I help ye?—how can I explain a meestery sic as that?"

"Do you remember the night on which you and I talked together in the Ferry Inn about my sister? Oh! Janet, you opened your heart to me somewhat that night."

"I war dazed—I war a fule!" she answered, doggedly.

"You told me that you were learning to love my sister when she went away—that she had a reason for her flight."

"Deed I?" she answered, cautiously.

"Will you tell me that reason?—will you tell me why she fled so suddenly and mysteriously away?"

"Measter Gear, ye ken naethin', and ye theenk too muckle of a' the nansense my head's been gallied wi' I ken but leetle of the dark nicht's wark—it war beyon' a' guessin' o' mine, sir. If I war larnin to luvè the lassie—she held aff and would na' trust me. She went awa' untrustin' me."

"Janet, she *did* go?"

Janet's colour changed—her eyeballs protruded—she glared at me with horror.

"Mon, do ye think her hoosband murdered her? Do ye think—do ye think," she said, in a husky whisper, "so bad o' him as that?"

"I have no faith in him, and only fear for any living thing that stands in his way."

"Ye are awfu' hard, sir," said Janet, resuming her stolid demeanour; "had I anythin' to sae, I could na' tak ye into my confidence after a' that ye ha'e spak to me. Sir, I stand by him still, and luvè him still," she cried with true dignity; "do ye ask me to be a spy upo' him?"

"I ask you, Janet, by the love you bear my wife, by my wife's love for you, and by her anxiety and love for Ellen, to tell me in what manner my sister left her husband's home?"

"I canna tell."

"Janet!" I cried.

"I ken ony that she did leave. If it wull make ye happier, I can tak my oath she left the hoose."

"Janet, I will take your word. You have been ever a faithful friend—you saved my wife's life—I have no need to think myself deceived."

"May I ask ye a question?" she said, curiously.

"Yes."

"What new scheme be this, that ha gi'en ye so wild a luke, and made ye theenk of puir Mrs. Vaughan just now?"

"He is thinking of marrying again, of casting her aside who took his name, and of holding her up to a shame which I feel is undeserved."

"Ye canna sae—it's a' awfu dark!"

"I must defend her, Janet—I must discover Ellen."

"Wull—ye are her brither—ye luve her, and ha' a richt to defend her. But I think ye wull waste yer time—I see nae gude, and muckle harm, to follow sic a step."

"Janet, you will not help me?" I said, reproachfully.

"I tell ye, I hae na power. And I tell ye, if I had," turning upon me with a fierce face, "I wud na muve my leetle finger. Ha' I luv'd the bairn sae lang, to turn agin him at sae late an hoor?"

"In God's cause—why not?"

"Ye shall na tell me that I've lost a' hope o' him—I hold firm still—I dinna giv' wa'—my heart's na mair braking than yer ain!"

She brandished the hand that held the prayer-book in the air, and then as suddenly calmed, and assumed her grim inflexibility of visage.

"Ye wull na truble me mair," she entreated; "I'm e'er yer freend, for Mary's sake—I wish ye, wi' my auld heart, a' happiness thegither."

"Thank you, Janet."

"Gin ye gang back to Borrowdale next week, I may na meet ye again—I may ne'er see ye again. Tak' my luve to Mary—dinna harass her about a past that was nae verra happy—God bless ye baith!"

She strode out at a pace more rapid, as if she closed the conversation by those means. I made no effort to overtake her; I saw how futile further attempts would be to learn more of Ellen—even if more concerning her were known by Janet.

I let her go her way—stern, dogged, and faithful. I felt that Ellen had left Nettlewood House on the twenty-first of July last. In which direction, it became now my task to ascertain.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER DEFENDER.

THE incidents of that Sunday were not over yet. Whilst I was at my early dinner in the best parlour of the Ferry Inn, a message was brought that Miss Ray would be glad to see me in the course of the afternoon.

It was close on four o'clock when I presented myself at Miss Ray's house, obedient to the request of its proprietress. The servant ushered me into a handsomely furnished drawing-room where Miss Ray had received her guests a few weeks since—where the daughter sat awaiting me. As I entered by one door I observed that the governess, under whom Letty was still finishing her long-delayed education, departed by the other.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Gear," said she, rising for a moment, "this is a strange day to choose for business, you will think."

"It depends whether it be urgent, Miss Ray."

"It is urgent only so far as it concerns myself," she replied.

"Pray, be seated, and favour me by your attention."

"Willingly."

I sat down at some little distance from the handsome girl—growing more handsome and graceful, it seemed, as she became more educated. Looking at her then, so lady-like and stately—the fitting mistress of so fine a house—the old Ferry days went further and further back, and were scarcely reconcilable with that time.

"Mr. Gear, I am going to London for a few weeks—possibly for a few months. I have grown very tired of Nettlewood."

"Change is good for all of us, Miss Ray."

"I said once that I objected to the name of Miss Ray from those friends belonging to the past estate," she said, with a slight exhibition of irritation. "But no matter—possibly it is preferable between us now."

"I trust that I have not lost *caste* in your estimation latterly?"

"No—have I?"

This was asked with something of her old brusqueness, and I smiled as I replied,

"Why should I think less of you—hold you in less estimation than in the old days, Miss Ray?"

"I may tell you presently—we are speaking of business, in the first place."

"The business that takes you to London?"

"Business does not take me to London," she answered quickly; "on the contrary, I wish to leave behind here all business in your hands. You are a friend in whom I can trust, Mr. Gear—one of the few friends I possess still."

I bowed my head to the compliment. I had no reply to make just then; I waited for further explanations. She made them, fluttering a costly fan in her hand the while, in a fine lady fashion which she had learned of her governess, mayhap, but which irritated me a little with its seeming affectation.

"I leave for London very early in the morning—I am anxious to arrange with you a few details before I go. These alterations—how long will they take now?"

"A fortnight more perhaps. As far as my own supervision is concerned, I think I can afford to turn to other business away from here at once. Like yourself, I am very tired of Nettlewood."

"The associations connected therewith are not pleasant, Mr. Gear," she said, her white brow contracting a little, "but I would beg you to endure them for a while. I wish you to remain here in this house as my steward—what you will—and keep watch and ward over the estate. I have been thinking of building a school-house in the neighbourhood, and shall be glad to see your plans and estimate."

"Thank you, Miss Ray," I answered, "but you must allow me to decline the stewardship—you must even let me postpone all further business in Nettlewood for a while. I am very anxious to be gone."

"The house can take care of itself then," she said a little abruptly; "it was suggested to me, and I fancied that the offer might have appeared suitable to you. You might have found time to look round the village, and choose your own site for the school I mention. I am very anxious to build that school—to do some little good here."

"I do not decline this offer, Miss Ray—considering that it concerns my partner's interest as well as my own, I have no right to do so. But for a while, and so far as regards myself, I *must* be free"

"You are unsettled," she said, regarding me steadfastly.

"Very," I confessed.

"You are troubled concerning your sister still?"

"Pardon me," I interrupted quickly, "that is a forbidden subject, and I am sure you will not intentionally pain me."

"Oh! I will not speak of her again," she said, fluttering her fan more violently, "it is an unpleasant subject, as well as a forbidden one. I am glad to see that your wounded pride turns from all mention of her name."

"My wounded pride!"

"She was ever unworthy of you, sir. Strange that in brother and sister there should be at times so wide a difference."

"Ay—an awful difference," I muttered.

"I was thinking of Vaughan and my wife at that moment, and Miss Ray's first remark—woman's stern and hasty verdict on one of her own sex—passed me unheeded by.

"Then I may not hope that you will remain here during my absence, Mr. Gear?"

"I am compelled to leave."

"Your wife is at Borrowdale—you will be glad to return to her?"

"Yes."

"I cannot blame you—I can sometimes," with a smile "envy you a little."

It was a smile that told of her own content in the present, her own hope in the future—not the forced smile that had seemed once akin to pain.

"You are going to London, you tell me, Miss Ray," I said, rising, "it is scarcely a city in which a young girl, alone like yourself, can feel at home."

"My companion attends me—Mr. Vaughan will be in London to protect me."

The name was brought intentionally into the dialogue—I marked the effort, the flush that stole over her face, the steady gaze she directed towards me whilst she spoke.

"I am sorry for that," I exclaimed.

The words escaped me—overleaped the guard I had set upon my tongue. I was anxious to decline all business in Nettlewood, and take my departure coldly, avoiding all discussion of topics that might be dangerous to tread upon. But I had thrown down the gauntlet, and it was snatched up on the instant. I believe she had been waiting for an opportunity to defend Herbert Vaughan.

"Why sorry?"

The ice once broken I spoke out.

"I am sorry, Miss Ray, because the days are early yet to acknowledge Mr. Vaughan your suitor—because Mr. Vaughan has still to prove his poor wife's infidelity."

"It will be proved, sir—if there were a doubt about it, would I allow him to see me for an instant?"

"It would have been more maidenly to wait."

I had thought this long since, and I did not spare her the avowal.

"I scarcely comprehend yet what is considered maidenly in polite society," she said; "where the heart is concerned, I follow its dictates, and care little for those who consider themselves justified to harshly criticize. I love him, sir,—and I am proud to own it."

"Great heaven! why do you love that man?"

"Great heaven! sir," she exclaimed passionately, "why have you

so long misjudged him—why, in your selfish interest for her who has disgraced him, do you feel no pity, no respect for one who thinks and speaks always highly of yourself?”

“I am flattered by his opinion of me—I regret that it is impossible to return it. I regret still more to hear you love him——”

“I have loved him all my life,” she interrupted; “you, who have known all that that life has been, can guess how I have struggled with my passions, borne with it, let it sweep me almost to death, in despair of it ever becoming something higher, better than it was. I loved him when he was beneath me—I loved him when his wife was turning against him, and there was no sympathy between them—it is the proudest triumph of my life to think he seeks that love at last, and looks to it in the future as the one comfort I can bring him for his life-long injury.”

She struck the fan upon the table as she spoke and shivered it to atoms. She sprang to her feet and stood erect, with flashing eyes and heaving bosom. Her passion robbed me of my stoicism; her wilful blindness to the object with which he sought her out; her wilful abnegation of all that had once lowered him in her eyes, by demonstrating his true character, led me to speak more sternly in return.

“I will not have it injury,” I cried, as warmly as herself; “no injury wrought by my sister’s hand has fallen upon him. God knows the reasons that led my sister’s steps away from home and husband—I will not question them, I ask for them forbearance. More, Letty Ray, I warn you—I feel that I must warn you—of one who destroyed my sister’s happiness, and he will have no mercy upon yours.”

“I—I cannot listen to this, Mr. Gear—I will not listen!” she cried.

“I warn you as the friend you styled me but a moment since—the friend that wishes you all happiness, and prophesied that it would come to you one day. I ask you to pause—to reflect—to remember every action in the past wherein your faith was less in Herbert Vaughan.”

“All that drove me nearly mad in the past has been explained, sir,” she said, proudly; “do not taunt me with my own ignorance and folly. It is not your place—it is unbecoming a gentleman.”

“Miss Ray, I will say no more.”

I bowed and moved towards the door. When I held the door open in my hand she called me—even came towards me.

“Mr. Gear,” with a faint smile, “we will part friends, at least. You are the victim of a strange hallucination, and I will not let it rob me of my esteem for much that is good and noble in your character. To Mr. Vaughan, whom it might pain, I will say nothing of the particulars of our interview—I will wait the time wherein you will think more generously of him and me.”

"Miss Ray, I do not distrust *you*."

"You distrust my *maidenly* reserve—in my conduct you see much to blame."

"In your place even with your love, I should certainly have parted awhile, Miss Ray, but I do not distrust you."

"Before his wife deserted him, he made me the confidante of the doubts that were preying upon him, and I strove to re-assure him by speaking, even against my own conviction, in your sister's favour. When those doubts were verified, I could not turn away and say it was 'unmaidenly' to give him comfort in his trouble."

"Still——"

She interrupted me; she would hear no more.

"I tell you I know nothing of the world—that only a little while ago I was an ignorant village girl," she cried; "I tell you here again that rich or poor, I will never set that world between me and a generous impulse, and I will never care to study it!"

"If you would only promise me to study human nature and its motives more closely for a while," I said.

It was reviving the old grievance I could not forbear. Young, handsome, wealthy, I saw her, blinded by her love, walking on to the abyss, trusting in the hand which led her to the brink. I saw her in the future, when Vaughan was free, perhaps, following in my sister's track, adding one more victim to the sacrifice. I saw the infatuation that possessed her; I knew the power of the man to please, to disguise, to ensnare, and, under any circumstance, I beheld a life that might have gained its share of sunshine, sinking from the light and all human effort powerless to save her.

"I will make that promise *with you*," she answered to my last appeal.

"I am already studying human nature."

"With a bandage over your eyes," was her quick, almost laughing response.

I did not laugh with her; I bowed gravely over the hand she held towards me, and prayed silently for her awakening. If the fate that lay beyond for her, there was nought to raise a smile in me.

"All letters written to me here will be forwarded on," she said.

"If you will let me have your account, I shall be glad to settle it."

"Thank you."

So ended this talk of "business." So parted Letty Ray and I for many a long day.

CHAPTER IV.

AMONGST THE MOUNTAINS.

FOR what reason did Herbert Vaughan profess so much attachment to myself—speak ever of me as one whom he wished to call his friend.

That was the question which I asked myself, proceeding back towards the inn. Was it to contrast my own bitter enmity towards him; to deceive her further by his false airs of amiability even to his enemies?—or, by persistence, to hope in finally deceiving me?

But the curtain had dropped between the past and him; he would have stood aghast, and I should have made an enemy of him at last, could he have known all that his sister had divulged to me. There was no mystery in his character after that dread revelation—by all that he had acted in the past, and she suspected, I could guess all that he had dared to do. I could believe that Ellen had met with foul play at his hands, and spurn indignantly away the crafty lie which accounted for her disappearance.

Each hour that passed more firmly strengthened me in the belief that Ellen was dead—and that not far from me were hidden the awful proofs. Every hope of seeing her again, of holding her to my heart once more, had withered, and there was not one blossom of hope left. To find her in her unhallowed resting-place, and bring her murderer to bay was all my purpose now. I should not rest, night or day, until I solved the mystery; every turning of the tortuous road that baffled me but strengthened my dogged resolution to search on.

I rose early the next morning, prepared to search the Black Gap Pass, continue my route to Borrowdale, and see my wife and mother ere my restlessness drove me forth a wanderer once more.

Over my breakfast which I could scarcely touch, I studied the last present Ellen had given me—the pencil drawings of the Ferry, and the mountains seen from the Black Gap Range. The latter interested me most; it was the scene to which I was drawn, where my suspicions lay, whither Ellen had been fond of wandering. She knew every turn of the road, she confessed to me when giving me the sketch—surely she went this way then, as safer for herself, and wherein it was more likely to elude pursuit.

Drawn by her skilful hand it was a gloomy picture enough—from the range of mountains this side of Engerda.e River, separating the

two gaps, she had sketched very truthfully the desolateness of the landscape. I had caught a glimpse of it in the murky twilight, when the mists were driving at me in the valley on the only time I had tried the pass; here was a faithful transcript of the vale I had hurried through, and the mountain land that hemmed it in. The sheep-fold lay in a hollow close against the mountain side—a few hasty pencil-marks presented it to the eye, an utter ruin, in unison with the wildness of the scene. Ellen had put her initials to the drawing—E. V.—on a stone, or boulder, that was close against the sheep-fold—it looked so like a tomb, beletteed thus, that I shuddered and laid down the sketch.

"I am growing superstitious," I muttered, rising to look at the sky and read therefrom an augury of the weather. A sky clouded and unsettled as myself—giving no promise of rain, perhaps, as the day was clear and the mountain tops stood out rugged and sharp,—but a cold disheartening heaven, with leadeny clouds floating slowly along, a screen between the sunshine and the earth which yearned for it.

I was ready to depart. Ellen's sketches were in the breast-pocket of my coat; I had slung a knap-sack on my back; to the foreman of the works who had visited me that morning, I had left all requisite instructions; days, weeks, or months might elapse before I stood again in Nettlewood—all was uncertainty, all pursuits in life were flat, unprofitable, and devoid of interest—the face of my wife was but the one bright spot in the dead vista of the Beyond.

Jabez, himself ferried me across the lake, and reddened and stammered when I offered to shake hands with him.

"Thankee, sir," he said, "it's koind o' ye. We're all sorry you're going—we're hoping you'll soon be back again.

"In good time, perhaps."

"Nettlewood's got to be—that is, it ain't got to be—like Nettlewood a bit without you. I'm sure that you'll come back, sir."

When I turned towards the field across which lay the route to the Black Gap, he said,

"You mean to try the gaps atween the Fells, sir?"

"Yes—shall I have fine weather?"

"I think the rain'll keep off a soight o' toim. You're roight eno' to-day, and if you loike clambring, why it's the best, way hoome."

"I fancy so myself. Good day."

"Good day to you, sir—good day. Allus good luck to you, Mr. Gear!"

And with this benediction from the honest countryman, I turned my back on Nettlewood once more.

The day was before me; I was not pressed for time; I wished to proceed on my journey slowly and critically, following, in imagination, Ellen's footsteps, and trying to fancy whether they would have led her in the darkness. I don't know why I should have regarded this

journey through the Gaps as an important proceeding on my part; what motive impelled me to expect the faintest sign of incidents which had happened a month since. It was a fallacy to expect a sign, and yet I went on looking for it, as though Ellen had left Nettlewood but yesterday, or the route had been forbidden ground since July last. Half-a-dozen miners, quarrymen, and shepherds trod it almost every day; tourists, strayed from the tourist's beaten track in the Lake district, occasionally imitating their example; what was there left for me to base one hope or fear upon?

Still I went on, trusting to find some fragment, of a dress, torn, soiled and trodden under foot, that might betoken Ellen had been here, or to note some evidence of a deadly struggle, which had left the ground disturbed still. I studied intently the ground apart from the beaten track, rather than the regular line of pathway up the mountain; pursuer and pursued might have strayed out of course, and casual passers-by were not likely to be particularly observant. Half-way up the steep ascent the circuitous path turned sharply to the right, following on led slowly upwards again, and ended in a jutting point of iron stone, from which was a fall of a thousand feet or more. I deviated from the path, and wound my way to the crag, finding nothing by the way. On the crag I sat down to rest awhile, and looked down on Nettlewood, so still and peaceful a resting-place in the green bosom of the valley.

Could it be possible, thought I, that in that quiet spot of English country, where but half a dozen houses represented the village, so much mystery and crime had sprung; that from a place where peace seemed eternally at rest, had evolved such evil, and seethed such awful passion? Looking down upon it, it was a fair scene enough—a welcome contrast to the mountains shutting it in, and frowning down upon it in their rugged majesty. The valley and lakes were strips of green and silver, which I thought might be closed in at any moment by a forward movement of the hills on either side, and shut away for ever. Landslips had happened in these parts before, I had read in the dog's-eared guide-book at the Ferry Inn—it did not appear so impossible an event to blot Nettlewood eternally out of English topography.

In the little spot below me what a deal had happened to influence my life, and the lives of those I loved! Leaving the Great City, wherein every street had its romance, and every house its mystery—where tragedies were acted every day, and men, whose lives were matter for a thousand books, brushed you in the crowded streets, I left all peace of mind behind me, and in this silent place plunged into the turmoil! Strange accident, or strange working of destiny by Him who acknowledges no accident. Below, there I had made my first step in life, met my first love, been drawn to her by her struggles and her fears, won her for my wife through all the plotting that went on against us both, saw acted there, and played a part myself in, a

drama of wild plot and under plot, on which the curtain had suddenly dropped and left all interested wondering what the end was!

"Would the end ever be arrived at?" I thought as I retraced my steps to the regular footpath, up the Black Gap; "or ten years, twenty years hence should I and Mary still be left to wonder at it all?—to tell our children what strange things had happened in our day and never come to light?"

The rain kept off, although no break of sunshine occurred during my progress; no wind was stirring, all was very quiet round me. Amongst the mountains there reigned a stillness singularly impressing—one felt hidden away from the world there. A bend of the track—if track it could be called any longer—shut Nettlewood away from me; I was far on my way now; I was ascending, then descending where the land dipped; then reascending, at times a little puzzled as to the direct route. If Ellen had come this way that night, missed her way, and gone wandering on in the darkness, how easy to fall into one of these hollows, and be heard of no more, or be found, months afterwards, by a horrified shepherd, whose dog had strayed away to rouse the echoes of the hills with its discovery. Such things had happened—might happen again.

Engerdale! On the high land I looked down upon it. I had passed through the gap, there were heavy-browed rocks piled on all sides of me. My steps led downward to a valley more silent than Nettlewood, possessing not one single inhabited house for miles, disturbed alone by the murmur of the river that wound its solitary course down the vale, and was fed by the leaping, hurrying "Force," which broke its way from the rock, and dashed tumultuously towards it—a valley shut in more closely and in more sombre fashion than Nettlewood by dark verdureless hills. Engerdale Vale they called this in the guide-books—"Tween the Gaps" was its more homely and more fitting designation.

I looked at my watch—the hour was only eleven in the morning; there were yet many hours of daylight before me. If I searched this vale minutely, some little evidence of all that might have happened therein would surely reward my search. There had been few observant eyes this way; travellers hurried through it and across the river, only anxious to press forward; more than one Cumberland superstition was connected with this place, and no native cared to wander hither save in the bright sunshine.

When Ellen gave me her pencil sketches, she told me of this vale—what a favourite spot it was, from its very loneliness, from the strange effect produced in the midst of its sombreness by the hoarse murmur of the "Force," and the rippling of the restless water against the stones in the river-bed.

I drew forth her sketch, and compared it with the landscape—almost from my own point of view had the drawing been taken—here meandered, faint and circuitous, the stony path downwards; there

was the valley and the stepping-stones across the stream, and the ruin of the sheep-fold against the rocks. I went down slowly to the vale, with the sketch in my hand, as though it were a map which Ellen had left me of her wanderings; I stood amongst the rank grass of the vale, where a few sheep, lank and boney, had strolled from some remote district; I crossed the stream, now less swollen by rains than when I first waded through it in the early days; I broke from the track, and wandered through a mass of wild herbage and jagged bits of rock that had glided from the mountain side, towards the fold which some farmer, long gathered to his fathers, had knocked together as a refuge for his sheep when the storm met them 'tween the gaps.

"Hard pressed by one who sought her life, this would have struck her as a fair hiding-place," I muttered, when I stood surveying the ruin which a hundred storms had left there.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHEEP-FOLD.

It was a larger building than I had expected to discover; dwarfed by perspective, it had seemed a little wooden shed rent by wind and rain, and cowering in the shadow of the rock. Close upon it, I found it a long low edifice, constructed of rough-hewn timber, and standing about ten paces from the mountain, in lieu of resting against it, as in the picture she had drawn. It was an utter ruin. Built round the angle of the rock, the wind had yet found power enough to burst its sides in, strip half the red tiles from the roof, render it an uncomfortable resting-place even for the sheep. The side nearest the river had been boarded in, whilst the other side had been left open, its constructor having laboured under the delusion that the rock at some little distance was sufficient protection from the storm for quadrupeds. The roof was supported from within by a few cross beams and pillars, formed of hewn branches of a tree that had been lopped down in the neighbourhood, and fixed there in all their native ruggedness.

The cross beams were open to the sky now, and fragments of the red tile that had formed the roof were scattered about the ground

beneath. Only at one extremity had the wind been charitable, and left a square yard of tiling, over which some lichens had grown luxuriantly, and were peeping down into the silent shadowy fold. The planks, weather-beaten and storm-driven, were dashed in in many places, one rough piece of timber supporting the roof had been snapped in twain and the lower parts left jagged and splintered. Entering the sheep-fold from the back, I stood and looked at the wreck of good intentions represented by this ruin. The place was full of shadow, and had an unearthly aspect beneath the leaden sky that lowered through the rent roof; the grass was growing beneath my feet; the fragments of rocks had found their way there; one heavy boulder had evidently been hurled from the mountains in some hurricane, and gone crashing through the roof into the fold; the lichens were growing within, and decay and dry-rot were slowly but surely levelling the frail tenement to earth.

The fold possessed one occupant—a stolid sheep curled in the darkest corner of the place, too feeble and sick to hurry away at my approach. It lay panting in the corner, and blinking at me as I stood there; wherever I turned, its eyes looked after me distrustfully.

I raked amongst the grass and stones with the point of my walking stick I had brought with me, but no sign of the past came to the surface. Here had ended all hope of finding Ellen. I must follow on the old track and discover Wenford, and endeavour to learn from him the share that he had had in the mystery, and why he left on the very night that Ellen went away. My nervous fancies, after all deceived me—Ellen had not come this way, or hidden whereabouts. I sat down on the ground at last, with my back against the wood-work of the fold, and tried to think of the best course to follow after this, and whether it were not wise of me to retrace my steps and pursue my route along the car-road which skirted the Black Gap range of mountains. Yet I was strangely disposed to linger here—my nervous fancies had not all dispersed, and I could believe that in this ruin I was more near the truth—more near Ellen's grave! In such a place as this, had she been pursued, she would have hidden; in such a place, had she been murdered, would her body have been buried.

I tried to assume the part of a murderer myself, and to imagine what I should do in a spot like this burdened with the dead form of my victim. I could not leave it in the vale; the river was too shallow to sink it in; in this ruin it seemed only possible to bury it. I stood up again, and tried the earth with my heel; I poked at the sick sheep to induce it to move; finally, I put my arms round it and dragged it to the opposite corner, it bleating plaintively meanwhile. Where the sheep had lain, something crushed and soiled rivetted my attention—one slight proof for which I had been searching through the day. I made one dash towards it, clutched it in my hand, and glared at it with suspended breath.

"He was here that night—I swear it!" I ejaculated.

It was a glove that I found—a yellow kid glove, stitched in an eccentric manner with black. He wore gloves of that kind on the night I saw him at Mrs. Ray's—the very night of Ellen's flight. I remembered on the instant that my attention had been directed to them then—I was sure this was one of them!

I was on the track—God had mercifully afforded me one sign of all the evil that had been practised here. From this what might not follow?—there was the whole vale to search now—every turn and hollow of the mountains, till they opened into the village some ten miles lower down. I would search every spot, and know no rest till I had discovered further trace—I swore it there upon my knees, with my heart plunging and my temples throbbing wildly. I placed the glove carefully in my pocket-book, and then tried the earth on which the glove had lain, but it was hard and rock-like, and gave forth a ringing sound that told of its remaining undisturbed since the sheepfold was built over it. I sat down to ponder on the new course that lay open to me; a sickening sense of nausea was upon me—if there *had* been a faint hope of Ellen before then, it had vanished with that discovery. I felt assured that Herbert Vaughan would not have coolly asserted the gigantic lie he had framed to hide her guilt, if she were living to refute it. It was a lie that turned suspicion at once from him, and did not spare her in her grave.

Though the sky was open to me, and the little air that was stirring came sighing through the rents and fissures, the place felt stifling and unhealthy. I made a movement to depart at last, and rose with that intention, when a footfall on the stones without arrested me. A footfall that came on at a rapid pace, and turned the corner of the fold where it was open to all comers—a footfall that stopped suddenly.

I looked up; Herbert Vaughan stood looking in upon me, a man rooted to the spot by horror at the sight of me. I saw his face change—the ashen greyness replace the healthful look it always bore—even for an instant the lower jaw drop with a vacuity of expression that wholly changed the naturally keen countenance.

“Gear!” he gasped.

I was surprised by his appearance there; for a moment he took me off my guard, and I clutched my stick more firmly in my hands, as though I feared an attempt upon my own life.

“What has brought you to this place?” he asked.

My first impression was that I had been watched, but when I noted his unnatural paleness, his complete bewilderment at thus suddenly his coming upon me, I felt that it was a chance meeting, and that he had been led hither to search—possibly not for the first time—for the glove that lay about here, one witness which might rise against him, and defeat the scheme he had in view.

I was on my guard then, and answered:

“I am returning home to Borrowdale, Mr. Vaughan.”

“You have chosen a strange resting-place,” he said.

"Surely no stranger for you than me, sir."

He had gained his self-command—he was an admirable actor.

"I saw you from the higher land, and came down after you. I am going to Borrowdale also—thence to London. I could not let the opportunity slip to offer you my hand again—for the last time to tell you that your unnatural want of friendliness towards me pains me, and that by any effort, by any sacrifice, I would live it down."

"Mr. Vaughan, we are best apart," I said, passing from the fold into the vale; "I do not believe in your friendship—I would rather that you told me frankly how much you hated me, and feared my power to work you harm."

"To work me harm," he said, keeping step with me, and regarding me with eyes that glittered somewhat, "I fear no man's power to do that. Why should I fear yours, my sister's husband more than others?—why should you, of all men, wish to do me evil?"

"I am a man in search of a sad truth," I answered; "if, finding that, I tread you under foot, I cannot help it."

Neither could I help my excitement in that moment—my warning that there was much that I suspected, and was seeking a solution for. If I were led by this to show my purpose too plainly, to put him on his guard, and set his wily brain to still more secure and baffle me, it was beyond my power to disguise the abhorrence that I felt for him.

"If your sad truth means the discovery of your sister's shame, follow it to the end. You may respect me more when you are face to face with it—when you have found her, and she owns her guilt to you. But to tread me under foot, Canute Gear, is beyond your malice, and your threats are idle to me."

"I threaten not."

He looked at me with a strange irresolution. In his heart, I knew that I was a mystery to him. For the first time in his life perhaps, he feared my grave persistence; found that his own specious phrases, his own apparent frankness of demeanour, only warned me of the nature he attempted to conceal thereby. He could not judge me accurately; my movements were undecipherable to him; my presence at the very place to which he had been drawn, had startled him with a sense of danger from which he had believed himself exempt.

"Mr. Gear," he said, after a long pause, I can only attribute this iron reserve to one cause. It is a hard one—it is an unjust one. My sister, in a weak moment, has spoken against me, and you have listened to her morbid fancies, and believe in them. If I be right in my surmise, I claim the right to answer any doubts of yours."

"I require no answer, sir—I make no accusation."

"For the last time," he cried, with some excitement on his own part, "I offer you the hand of a friend. For the last time I tell you that I would be your friend, ask your advice, give you a brother's place in my heart, work with you, even to find Ellen. For

the last time, Gear, will you sink the by-gones, and let me teach you to respect me more?"

He held his hand forth knowing him to be a villain, I yet was staggered by his manner for an instant. Then the stern truth came back and steeled me.

"I am not your friend."

"You are my enemy then—I am to be ever prepared against you. I see you working in the dark, and following some foolish theory which you have framed concerning me. You are my enemy and must take the consequences."

His suave manner vanished, and the hand that I had rejected, he clenched, and shook towards me. On his face then I saw the real expression of his heart, and felt how deadly and desperate was his nature.

He went on before me towards the White Gap, strode up the steep ascent, and turned not to look back till he was many hundred feet above me, when the first height was attained and the hill dipped. Then, with the grey sky backing his dark figure, he turned and looked down at me standing where he had left me last, with the river at my feet. He shook his clenched hand at me again and disappeared.

* * * * *

I reached Borrowdale four hours later. No further incident had met me by the way, no further proof of the one crime which shadowed everything, had come to light. I had toiled on slowly; I had gone back more than once; I had taken twenty different paths away from the direct route, and with difficulty retraced my steps—I arrived home very worn and weary, but strengthened more than ever to follow in my search, and to study the Vale of Engerdale next day.

HOME! What a relief it was, after all the intense anxiety of the day!—notwithstanding that I crossed the threshold with my one load of doubt still heavy on my mind.

They were not expecting me, my mother and Mary. This was a surprise for them, which I had built on somewhat, and I was rewarded by their cry of delight, and their joyful running forward to meet me.

Mary had heard the click of the wicket-gate, and was in my arms before my mother, not so agile as herself, had made her way to the open porch. In the evening sunset, my wife and I went up the garden-path together.

"I am so glad, Canute—I was growing tired of home without you, and pining to get back to Nettlewood."

"To get back to Nettlewood—how strangely that sounds!"

"Anywhere—where you are!" she said, adding, with more eagerness, "oh, Canute! you must never leave me for long! Whatever takes you away, must not take you without me. I fear for you more than myself, when we are separated."

"Well, we will not talk of parting, Mary, in the first moments of this meeting. Has he been here—your brother?"

"No."

She looked up with a scared white face, at once dreading danger on the instant.

"He passed through Borrowdale this afternoon—probably he rode from Keswick to Bowness, as he seemed anxious to reach London."

"He did not come here."

My mother met us at this juncture, and clasped her fond arms round me.

"My dear boy, this is more like home now. Mary and I have been trying to think this home without you, and make the best we could out of your absence. But—oh, dear!—what a difference you make!"

"Thank you," I said, "I am glad to see that you appreciate the advantages of my presence."

The light vein I had assumed did not elicit a smile from her, however; there were thoughts too grave and deep for much smiling in those dim latter days. On her face I saw the lines of care more deeply graven, or, in my own selfish pursuits, I had not remarked them much when she was helping to nurse Mary. Still my forced air of cheerfulness deceived her, for she said at once,

"Have you heard from Ellen?"

"No."

"Not a line? Never a word to the old mother, who prays that she may think of her, and write to her, and tell her that she repents even at the last."

"Hush!—hush!" I said. We will not judge her, mother, God alone knows the motives which took her from her home, and you and I, at least, should be the last to think them guilty ones."

"Don't you think—oh! don't you think her guilty?"

"I do not."

"Oh, Canute!—I thought not until I came home here—and then I got foolish and superstitious about the willow—you will not laugh at me for that?"

"About the willow—what do you mean?"

"Come with me—you don't know how it has troubled me."

We turned back down the garden path, and went along the country-road a little way, towards my mother's cottage, then closed and untenanted whilst she kept Mary company. We did not enter the house, but passed round by the broad side-garden to the back where the willow, planted in its youth by Ellen's hand had been set when my mother brought it from London. It had given promise of flourishing there when I had seen it last—now it was withered and dead.

"It shrivelled up suddenly—I left it green and strong, Canute."

"The lightening perhaps—or something at the root. We must

not believe in auguries—or see cause for grief in a willow-tree dying, mother.”

“I knew you would scold me,” she said, wiping her eyes; “but I was always a little superstitious, and it came on me quite a shock, dear. It has always been a part of Ellen to me, something by which I always remembered her and loved her. I grew to love the tree for her sake—almost to fancy that whilst it grew and flourished, she would flourish too. I can almost fancy—don’t scold me again, my son—that her life died out with the willow’s.”

My wife caught my arm, and looked up at me. She and I had long since given up all hope of Ellen’s life—only the mother clung to that hope still, and knew nothing of our secret.

“Would you rather hear that she had died, mother, or that she had fled to infamy?”

“Heaven help me,” exclaimed my mother. “I would rather hear she was living still, waiting God’s good time to repent, and come back to my arms.”

It was a mother’s wish, and I said no more concerning it. She clung to her one hope, and I had not the heart to dash it down. I could not tell her of my own belief—or point to the stricken tree, and say,

“So suddenly and unaccountable passed Ellen from life unto death!”

BOOK VII.

PLOTTING.

“Who charges guilt on me ?

“*Mustapha*.—Who charges guilt !

Ask of thy heart ; attend the voice of conscience—

Who charges guilt ! Lay by this proud resentment

That fires thy cheek and elevates thy mien,

Nor thus usurp the dignity of virtue.”

JOHNSON.

“Why, there’s an end then.”

EDWARD MOORE.

CHAPTER I.

FELLOW-SEARCHERS.

I LINGERED not many days at Borrowdale. I had no heart to sit still and take comfort from the home affections; till the darkness round Ellen's last days was rolled away like a cloud, I felt a guilty coward idling time there. In a few months, were to come, with God's will, a great happiness, and a new source of joy—I had feared their being dashed away from me in the sad hours of Mary's illness, but the hopes were living still.

My course was difficult to follow out under these circumstances, for Mary became more restless and excitable; the fear of danger befalling me in some unexpected form, rendered her anxious concerning my safety, and my own confidence did not reassure her. Though the past was no longer hidden from me, and I knew all that she had feared and suffered therein, yet she still entertained the one nervous objection to dilate upon it. For my sake she had told me all her fears, all her trials in the early days before we knew each other; she had offered me the clue to the dark labyrinth of her brother's life, but she did not care to follow it. That grim past did not stand now between her and me, and she was content; drop the veil over it again, and save her from the phantoms which kept her mind disturbed with the fear of their approach. To speak of the past to her was to make her colour change, and hold her breath suspended; to speak of Ellen was to bring back all the fears that she had had for her—more than all, the weakness and agitation from which she had heretofore suffered.

Hers was not a bold spirit made to combat stern truths; hers was a nature that required support, the love and protection of one who could think for her, and be her shield against her own superstitions. She was a woman to love with her whole heart, and to be loved—but she was a fragile flower, and unfriendly elements had overtaken her strength. I could not seek counsel of her, confess to her all my bitter thoughts and vain imaginings—could not tell her the whole truth.

It was a strange, almost a sad position, against which I had no right to complain—against which I never thought of complaining. Her very weakness had helped to strengthen my love for her before my marriage; her child-like confidence in me kept my love pure and bright in those days wherein one stern idea possessed, and I knew no consolation for it.

I did not look forward to the end; to the time when the secret might be wrested from Herbert Vaughan, and I require just expiation for it. What might happen when the end was reached, I did not care to dwell upon. The ascent was steep and the distance far—I was content to go on slowly, surely; taking no heed of the time when crime should be brought to bay, and I should have to act sternly and decisively. When that time came, sufficient opportunity for me to resolve to shield or to avenge—I could not sketch that meeting face to face yet, or say, "Thus will I strike him down," when the hour came to place him at my mercy.

Concerning him, I was compelled to speak when I mentioned my determination to proceed again to Nettlewood, and work backwards from the inn at Triesdale, to which place I had tracked Mad Wenford. I had lost all trace of Ellen; through Wenford it might be possible to gather at least one hint or two concerning her or Vaughan, which might set me once more on the track.

"You will not be long away, dearest?" my wife said.

"But a few days, possibly a week."

"If you are longer away, you will write to me, and let me join you? I am very unhappy in your absence—I have great fears for you."

"Mary, I cannot rest. I must find Ellen, or some trace of her."

"Yes," she sighed, "it is but natural. But in searching for the sister, you will not forget the wife?"

"Do you think I shall?" I asked her.

She was in my arms at that appeal; her dear impulsiveness brought her to that shelter where she felt most confidence.

"No, no!" she cried. "I have no fear of that. I am only weak and superstitious, and cannot explain all the follies that bewilder me. Sometimes," dropping her voice to a whisper, "when I am grieving for your absence and pining for a sight of this dear honest face again, I feel haunted by a spirit—*hers!*"

"Why, this is childish indeed, my dear girl."

"Haunted by her and her reproaches," continued Mary, in the same excited manner, "hearing a far-off whisper as though she chided me for that selfishness which would keep you at my side, or screen him who has been so strange a brother to me."

"You must not think of this," I said, firmly; "better to accompany me, and share all my doubts and fears than this. If I am likely to be long away, I shall write for you to join me."

She looked relieved, and my mother entering gave a turn to the conversation. That very evening, when Mary had preceded me to our room by a few moments, I told my mother of all that I had resolved upon.

"I believe I have a clue to the discovery of Mr. Wenford," I said. "I think it necessary to seek him out, if possible."

"It may be necessary—God knows, my dear—I don't," answered my mother.

"I shall see Mr. Sanderson in the morning, and throw myself upon his generosity again. I fear I am but a poor partner for him, at this juncture."

"Why don't you write to Joseph?" asked my mother.

"To Joseph!"

In the whirl of events that had engulfed me, I had almost forgotten him. His life lay so far apart from mine, ran on in so different a groove, and was actuated by motives so foreign to my own, that he had scarcely cost me a minute's speculation since I had parted from him last.

"He is out of business, and has but little to do," added my mother; "I am sure for my sake and yours, he would make every necessary inquiry in London, and save you much trouble and expense. He had always so shrewd a head, my dear, if you remember."

Poor mother! I had not shaken her confidence in her eldest-born's honesty and shrewdness—I had let him keep, perhaps, the first place in her heart, and hidden the story, which he had confessed, of his own baseness, far away from her whose motherly love had reared an idol from such crude materials. She had ever admired that tact—to give it no harsher term—which had made Joseph a rich man; which had placed him at the head of the family, and I let him keep his place there, and even sang his praises to keep one honest soul from breaking down. Latterly she had known much tribulation—was not the mother of the old days—who could gather her children round her in a few hours—let her life pass as smoothly on to the end as God would allow, and I could make it!

I professed to have forgotten Joseph's shrewdness—even promised to call upon him, compare notes, and profit by his wisdom, if the chance presented itself. My mother knew his address; he had written to her once at Borrowdale, to ask if anything had been learned of Ellen; and for that symptom of interest in one who had been his favourite, I forgave Joseph all past trespasses. He had been a cold, hard man, whom nothing seemed to affect, and I read his letters with a new feeling of charity towards him. There was no shadow of the narrow-mindedness which had characterised his life upon the hastily-scribbled sheet. I had forgotten, almost, that Ellen was his sister as well as mine, until that night.

"If you know anything of Ellen," he wrote, "if you or Canute have heard of anything, however trivial it may seem concerning her, I hope you will write to me at once."

My mother had written some weeks back, telling him of her inability to offer one scrap of intelligence concerning her daughter, of my wife's illness, and my own prostration, and nothing had been heard of Joseph Gear since that time. I took his address down in my

pocket-book, and then followed my wife to her room. The next day I set forth once more to Nettlewood, having previously seen my partner, and confessed my inability to work whilst tossed on that sea of uncertainty, which had surged round my quiet home.

"I can spare you, my lad," was his generous answer; "if there were any one whom I loved, that was lost to me, or in danger, you would spare me, I think, and not grumble at the double duty."

"I think not."

"Then God speed you, Gear."

So with this blessing on my enterprise, in which, after all, he had but little confidence,—as I learned in the future days when we were working together,—I set forth anew upon my search.

I hurried through Nettlewood and Horley to Quirkett's Farm and Triesdale; I threaded the Triesdale Pass, and took up my quarters at the inn where the clue had been obtained of Baines and Wenford. Thence, slowly and deliberately, I worked my way onwards, baffled often, but defeated never, obtaining here and there a proof—vague and indefinite, but still a proof—of those two, going on together, still in company, and still unattended by a third, who might have worked her way towards them from a quarter less likely to be watched.

With difficulty at last I traced them, or fancied that I had traced them, by railway to Liverpool. Here, by consulting files of newspapers, &c., I learned what ships had left the Mersey during that week, and whither they had been bound. Here the magnitude of my task began to appal me; here fifty speculations as to the future course of those two men began to bewilder me; here once more into the foreground came the doubts as to whether the result to be arrived at were worthy of the search, or whether it were not already sufficiently evident that Ellen Gear's disappearance had no connection with the departure of Wenford and Baines for Liverpool. Still I did not give up; by dint of much research I ascertained the names of the ships that had sailed for all quarters of the world on the day and following the day that Wenford and Baines arrived there.

A steamer for Canada from Wellington Dock; a steamer for Gibraltar, Genoa, and Leghorn; a steamer to Rotterdam to Nelson Dock; a steamer to the West Coast of Africa from the North Landing stage; a steamer to New York from Huskisson Dock, had sailed within the week, together with a host of smaller steamers for the seaport towns of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England.

I directed my attention to the Rotterdam, the Canadian, and the New York steam-packets in particular; if I failed in any information to be derived from the shipping agents, the task became almost beyond me. Wenford and Baines might have sailed to one of the

sea-port towns, or even have gone from Liverpool to London—in the swelling crowd of human life at this great mart of the world's commerce, further clue to them verged on the impossible.

I visited the shipping agents, calling at last upon those for the New York line of packets. I had been all day unsuccessful. Lists of the passengers who had sailed by those particular steamers alluded to had been submitted to my inspection; every information had been tendered me by the courteous clerks to whom I had made known my wishes, but the further I proceeded, the greater became my difficulties.

I entered the office of the agents for the New York line of packets, tired and dispirited. I had had a hope that I should have found some trace of two passengers arriving late for the Rotterdam or Canadian steamers, and, failing therein, I had not much confidence in any further efforts. After all, I was but human, gifted with none of those rare faculties of penetration for which a few men, here and there, are celebrated—only following on where it was easy to follow, and baffled just as easily as my fellow-men. I had been over-confident, and not realized sufficiently the magnitude of that task which in the latter hours loomed before me, and now cast upon me the whole weight of its depressing influence.

The office was about to close when I arrived. A sallow-faced clerk, with his hat on, was consulting with another over an unwieldy ledger; both looked up as I entered, the sallow-faced man turning off one of the burners above his head, by way of a significant hint to me.

"Could I see the list of passengers who left for New York by your vessel the *Cormorant*, on the 24th of July last?"

"You can to-morrow, sir—we can't attend to any more business to-night."

"What time to-morrow?"

"Oh! nine or ten—when you please, in fact," was the off-hand answer.

"Thank you."

I was leaving the office when the younger clerk, who had hitherto continued poring over the ledger, said suddenly—

"What date did you say?"

"The 24th of July, 18—," I repeated.

"That's the second inquiry to-day we have had about that ship, isn't it, Mapleson?"

Mapleson muttered a gruff negative, and the clerk answered sharply—

"Yes, it is."

"Well, then, it *is*," said the sallow-faced man, who was anxious to get home and keep down argument.

"What did you say it wasn't for, then," said the young clerk; "you're always saying it wasn't. Didn't you talk about the man

being small enough to be put under a glass shade, and ugly enough to be exhibited as a curiosity?"

"Oh! did he want that list? Very likely—good night."

And out went the sallow-faced man, whose example, after a moment's hesitation, I followed. I went my own way when in the narrow street, resolving in my mind the glimpse of something new and strange which the little sparring match between the clerks had afforded me. I coupled everything that happened now with my own particular case, and attributed at once the inquiry for the list to some one interested, like myself, in following these men. A man whose small stature and ill-looks had struck one of these clerks, at least—whom did I know of spare figure and countenance not the most winning in the world? *Joseph Gear!*

I stood at the corner of the street to think of this. Joseph Gear, my brother, who left Nettlewood on the morning following Ellen's flight—he who had written to my mother, asking for news of Ellen—he who shared with me the shame which one man would cast at us in his effort to be free, a man whom Joseph Gear confessed to hate, and would take no small trouble to circumvent. Surely, there was a chance of my brother being engaged on the same errand, working with me, and beside me in the hope of finding her.



CHAPTER II.

COMPARING NOTES.

REVOLVING this, and more than this, in my mind, I returned to my hotel, more perplexed than ever. If Joseph Gear were on the track also, how was it possible to find him and compare notes? I thought of his parsimonious habits, of the saving impulse which had led him at Nettlewood to take refuge in the common room of the Ferry Inn, rather than be burthened with the extra expense of a private room, and fancied it might be possible to discover him by his idiosyncrasy. He was, to a certain extent, a nervous man, therefore to a very low inn he would not resort, for fear of being robbed; he was, to a great extent, an economical man, therefore would have asked at the railway-station, or of a policeman, providing he had made no inquiry in London, as to the whereabouts of a decent and

cheap inn. In the coffee-room was Bradshaw's Railway-Guide, which I took up in the hope of discovering a few advertisements of inns at Liverpool. In this I was not disappointed—and, selecting two from the number, who held forth the advantages of good recommendation and moderate terms, I set forth in search of them. I found the inns with little difficulty, but gathered thereat no tidings of Joseph Gear—no gentleman answering my brother's description was lodging, or had been lodging there; the names of all comers were hard to arrive at—I might step into the coffee-room and look round for myself.

Everything being done, and everything failing, I went on to the railway-station, intending to inquire of a chance official where was the cheapest inn to be found—to put myself in Joseph's position, and assume, for a while, so far as it was possible, his particular weakness. I felt assured that if he had arrived a stranger to Liverpool he would not have left the station without harassing all who were able to afford him information by a hundred questions as to board and lodging.

There was a bustle at the great station; the government, or parliamentary train for London was on the point of starting—those bound Londonwards were pushing and tumbling over each other in their eagerness to secure the best positions, to see to their luggage, to find comfortable corners wherein they might curl themselves and be rattled off to sleep in due course; the guards were extra busy, and not inclined to pay much attention to any inquiries foreign to the business on hand. I sat down to wait till the train had departed, and left the officials time to breathe; very unreal and dream-like a position it appeared to be, sitting quietly there in a noisy railway-terminus, with the hurry of a world beside me—unconcerned about a seat near or far away from the engine, disturbed not by thoughts of a long journey, and friends or enemies waiting at the end thereof; caring little about the train being behindhand, or of the express following it in half an hour; content to sit there apart and moralize upon the travellers, and feel that with the joys and sorrows, pleasures, pains, or love of money that took them on their way, I held not a single share.

I thought so, and was mistaken. For shuffling towards the train, at a rate peculiarly his own, with a tiny carpet-bag in one hand, and a walking-stick in the other, there suddenly passed me Joseph Gear. I sprang to my feet, ran after him, and laid my hand upon his shoulder.

"Joseph!" I exclaimed, "stay! I want you—I am seeking you!"

My brother turned round, dropped his carpet-bag, picked it up with a trembling hand, and stared hard at me, as at a phantom.

"Good gracious!—whoever would have thought of finding you here!" he exclaimed.

He was too much amazed to offer to shake hands with me; he stood and stared, till I motioned him to follow me apart from the bustle.

"But—but I'm going to London."

"You must go by the next train."

"I've paid for the ticket," said he, ruefully.

"I'll pay for the next, if they will not accept the difference," I said. "Stop with me for a while—you must!"

"Very well," he said, with a half-sigh over the waste of money incurred by my precipitate act. "Now, what's the matter?"

"Sit down here, and I'll tell you."

Joseph sat down near me, and put his carpet-bag and stick beside him. Once he glanced nervously into my face, as though fearful of the nature of my avowal. This I noticed.

"What do you fear?" I asked.

"I thought that, perhaps, you had turned against me—that the story I told you once had rankled just a little, and made your feelings less brotherly towards me."

"I think but very little of the story, Joseph," I replied. "I am doing my best to forget it."

"Thank you," he said, humbly.

"If you will give it a moment's thought, you may guess the errand that brings me here."

"I don't see how that is possible."

"What brought you to Liverpool?"

"Business, Canute—a little private matter of business—that's all."

Joseph's caution perplexed me—annoyed me. What object could he have in this reserve.

"You came here on the same errand as myself. You were at the office of Messrs. Watson, Young, and Co., the shipping-agents for New York, this afternoon—you looked at the list of passengers, who left this port by the ship *Cormorant*, on the 24th of July."

Joseph continued to stare at me; his face to express every instant a greater degree of amazement.

"How did you find all this out?" he gasped.

"By chance. I am in search of our sister, stolen away or murdered, on the last night you spent in Nettlewood."

"Hush!—don't talk so loud as that! Are you mad?"

He looked round, and then dropped his voice to a whisper.

"We don't know whom we may put on guard," he said. "It is best to proceed slowly and cautiously."

"You are in search of Ellen?"

"Yes."

"You do not believe that she eloped with Mr. Wenford?"

"No."

I shook him by the hand again—I felt drawn towards him by ties

that, imperceptibly, had weakened, years ago—he was my brother again, in whom I could trust.

“Let us compare notes—you and I working together may hit on some fresh clue.”

“What have you found out?” he asked, with no small eagerness.

Briefly and rapidly I communicated the particulars of my long and unavailing search; of my visit to Quirkett’s Farm; the discovery of the horses; the tracking of the two fugitives to Triesdale Inn; of my breaking off that clue to follow the one which led me across the Black Gap; of the discovery of the glove in the sheep-fold; of my interview with Vaughan there; of all further trace vanishing away, and leaving nothing to guess at; of my renewed search after Wenford, ending with my meeting Joseph Gear.

He listened very attentively to my communication, only once distracted in the beginning of my recital by the departure of the railway-train. At that juncture he sighed again, and said,

“There it goes—sixteen and ninepence—oh, Lord!”

When it had rattled away out of the terminus, he crossed his hands on his knees, and attended to the rest of my story. At its conclusion, he drew a long breath, and said,

“Ah! there’s not much in it, after all!”

“What have you discovered?”

I saw the extra shade of caution stealing over his face—the resolve to keep back some portion of his own story. In the first hesitant stammer, I checked him somewhat indignantly.

“Tell me all, or nothing. If you do not see that our motive is alike, our interests alike, in this sad case—if you fear to put your trust in me, in fact—why, keep your secret to yourself.”

“I have every confidence in you, Canute,” he said; “don’t fire up so. You have grown so impetuous that it is difficult to understand you. I—I even think that we might work together, comparing notes at certain intervals, and following each his plan of action, till we run him to his death.”

He clenched one thin hand, and beat it on his knee. I knew of whom he spoke, without mention of a name between us. I saw that love for Ellen was not so much the ruling agent, as hate for him whom Ellen had loved and married.

“That man has ruined me,” he said; “and if the time comes for my turn I will not spare him. Canute,” he added, “I have not discovered more than yourself—that is, not much more—and I am only going to London now to work in my own silent way a little plan of mine, which may lead to something—which may not. I’ll tell you of that plan when we meet again—say, when I write to you, which I will presently—but there is nothing now I care to inform you about *that*.”

“Very well,” I responded coldly.

"It's only my own bait to catch a fish," he said, with a little feeble laugh of self-conceit; "I was always sharp enough, you know."

"Sharp enough," I said, as a grim remembrance shot through my brain like a pang, "oh! yes—that's true."

"What I have done, I have no objection to tell you, Canute," he said, in a conciliatory tone; "you have not told me anything of your future. That's all guess-work, and worth nothing perhaps."

That was true also.

"Well—what have you done for Ellen's sake?"

"I have, by very hard work, tracked Wenford and a man of the name of Baines—such a damned soundrel, Canute!—to this place. Losing scent in one direction, I tried this, like yourself."

"Successfully?"

"Yes—I think so. They left for New York on the 24th of July last."

"You are sure of that?"

"Yes—entering their names with much bravado as Edmund Wenford, of Nettlewood, and James Baines, servant to the above. They arrived in Liverpool only two hours before the vessel sailed, and had some difficulty in obtaining a passage, the vessel having its complement of passengers."

"They went away together. In that list there was no name of——"

"Ellen Vaughan—yes, there was."

"Good God!"

"Take it quietly, Canute. It should not deceive you. It did not me. That was a stroke of cunning on the part of them, but I think I see the reason for it all. That's a flimsy piece of duplicity, that should not deceive a sharp race like the Gears."

"What do you think?"

"That some woman was bribed by those men to personate Ellen Gear—to pay for her passage to New York by that name. If Herbert Vaughan wishes for a divorce, he must pave his ground carefully, you see. Women ready for any mischief are no more hard to find in Liverpool than London."

"We must discover the captain of the Cormorant."

"I have found him. I saw him but half an hour ago. He does not remember much about the passengers, save that there was amongst them a very tall man calling himself Wenford, and a lady—a brazen-faced lady, he said—who called herself Mrs. Vaughan. I have no proof that is decisive yet, but I can swear that that woman was not Ellen."

"I must go to New York," I cried.

"That would be folly," said my brother; "that would be falling into the trap they have set for us, and getting one of us at least comfortably out of the way. Ellen never left England—Ellen was dead when that vessel sailed across the Atlantic."

"You think so too!"

"Yes."

"Now tell me why you think so," I said; "you were awake and restless on that night of mystery; you did not sleep that night, but wandered about the banks of the lake—whom did you see cross the Ferry?"

Joseph looked on the flagstones, then at me.

"No one," he said at last.

"Is this true?"

"I went on towards Henlock; when I returned, the ferry-boat was gone. I heard the pistol shot at twenty-five minutes past two, and timed it by my watch. I scented danger, and waited for it till the grey morning, when I entered the Inn and fell asleep, worn out with watching. But Canute, in crossing by the Black Gap later that day, in following on the steps of those who fled from murder, and those who thought of it, I found this ring."

He rummaged in his waistcoat pocket, and finally produced a little circlet of emeralds and pearls.

"It's a small ring, but it cost me, wholesale price, three pounds ten and sixpence," he said; "I gave it her upon her birth-day once."

"Yes—and—"

"And I will swear it was upon our sister's finger the night we saw her at Mrs. Ray's party."

I held my breath suspended. What if all that was presaged by that evidence had been guessed at and prepared for?—what if I had become convinced that Ellen was no longer of the living?—still the shock fell with no lighter weight upon my throbbing heart.

"We have not to study that man Wenford much—or care much for this divorce case, that may be followed up or not," he said; "we have to search for Ellen's body, and bring her murderer to justice,

That murderer is in London, where I am going to watch him—your task is to return to Nettlewood, and search the Gaps night and day for further trace of her. She is hidden in the mountains, Canute!"

"It is my fear. It has been always my fear."

"There is not much evidence against him yet—Vaughan might intimate that Ellen had fled by the Black Gap, and joined Wenford at Liverpool. As for the Glove, that is a hard matter to bring home to him, and if brought home would not stand for much. Where is the sheep-fold?—how did I manage to miss it?"

I told him.

"Search that sheep-fold again, Canute," he hissed; "we shall have him yet. You're a sharper man than I ever gave you credit for—poor Ellen was sharp, too; how did she manage to fall into his trap so easily?"

"You have not one faint hope that she may have eluded him?"

"Would she remain silent all this while?—is she a woman to sit still and have her name and honour stolen from her?"

"No," I answered.

"Then I think we'll see about this ticket, and if we can get it exchanged for an express one by paying the difference," said Joseph, "I'll tell them I was too late for the train."

"Tell them that you were detained—that's the truth."

"So's the other, or I shouldn't be sitting here," he said, with a slight titter, which verged on the idiotic.

He went away, and returned after a while with an express ticket in his hand. Sitting down by my side, he sat and fidgeted with it, dropped it on the pavement, picked it up again, keeping it ever before my sight in a demonstrative manner. I took the hint at last, and inquired what the difference was between his parliamentary ticket and the express. He told me, adding:

"I should be sorry to take the money, if I were not so poorly off now. When I have the upper hand of Herbert Vaughan, I may get all the money back he swindled me out of. When he marries——"

"He shall never marry Miss Ray," I exclaimed; "do you build on that, and our sister's shame at once, then?"

"No, Canute," he replied; "I am only building on finding out his secret. But if he did marry her, all the greater disgrace for them both when the truth comes out. *She's* no friend of mine," he added, between his set teeth; "I haven't forgotten my lady's interference. And I should be very sorry to take the money, Canute, but it was your own offer, and I can't afford to travel by express."

"There's the money, I said.

"And I expect that's the train getting ready," he said, rising, after thanking me for my donation. "I must not lose that, or my chance of getting a good seat. I'm very tired—I'm very much worried—I'm not half so strong as I used to be."

"You will write to me when there is any news worth communicating?"

"Yes, I will—upon my honour."

He seemed anxious to dismiss the subject; he had told me all, and did not care to discuss the matter further. He was feverishly impatient to be gone; anxious to be quit of me now there was no more to be learned from me, and, perhaps, something of his future plans to be betrayed, if I pressed him closely. He took refuge in the train, and curled himself in the extremest corner away from the platform—looking a little aggrieved when I followed him, and took my place opposite.

"You're not going to London?" he said.

"No. But I will see you off."

"Thank you," he said; closing his eyes; "how my head aches, to be sure."

He opened his eyes when a stout old gentleman, followed by a

foreign-looking man, with rings in his ears, entered the carriage also.

"Good-bye, Canute," he said.

"Good-bye."

When he shook hands with me, I held him firmly in my grip, and looked steadily in those little twinkling eyes.

"Have you told me all?" I asked; "is there anything worth knowing, any clue worth following, which you keep back from me?"

"Why do you distrust me?" he asked, sulkily. "Why should I keep anything away from you?"

"God knows—I don't!"

"I give you my word that I will write when the time comes," he said. "Good-bye. Remember me to mother."

I left the carriage; the bustle on the platform had begun again. Travellers of a higher caste than those who had thronged the place before, were getting into their places, and harassing the guards. When I quitted the train, and stood by the door, Joseph crossed over, and sat by the window to exchange a few words with me. His last remark had reminded me of family ties, and he asked after his mother and my wife's health.

After a while, the train was ready to depart. The guard had slammed to all the doors; only a few were loitering like myself, and exchanging farewell greetings. The guard in charge ran the length of the train, and then whistled; the piercing note of the hissing engine shrieked out by way of response—the express train began to move.

Joseph's face beamed again with the joy of getting rid of me; by the light of the station-lamps I read that fact pretty plainly.

"Good-bye," I reiterated.

"Good-bye, Canute," he said; work with me down at Nettlewood—keep quiet, but confident. We shall run him to earth, be sure of that!"

He went away, confident and exulting. I did not like the expression on that withered face which glided away from me into the dark night beyond the station-light once again I felt divided from him by every wish and thought that should have bound us together—us two children of a widowed mother!

CHAPTER III.

THE CITATIONS.

TIME went on, and brought no further clue. Days, weeks, and months sped on with me and mine; from spring to summer, from summer to ripe autumn time, and no news of Ellen, no signs of Ellen's resting-place.

I had returned to Borrowdale and Nettlewood. I had striven hard for my partner's sake to sober down to work, escaping in my fitful moods to the Gaps once or twice a week, and searching continually and diligently for any further trace of the tragedy that had had existence there.

No further discovery, save the finding of a miner's tool shed, if discovery that could be called; the time stealing on, and the summer leaves fluttering from the trees. The mystery still deep and impenetrable, only that secret ever before me to mar the happiness which had come to me and mine in the quiet home at Borrowdale. A child had been born to us, and my wife was well and strong again. All had gone peacefully with our little circle; the fairy-face of the first-born lighted up home, and rendered it something still more pure and holy. We christened it Ellen, after her who was lost to us for ever; and my mother cried over it, and prayed that it might be the blessing that Ellen in her younger days had been to her. Of my love, or of the passionate adoration of my wife for that child, I need not dwell on here; proud young mothers and fathers have experienced all that I refrain from alluding to in this place, all that is too subtle and deep for any writing to attempt.

Early in November, then, we were well, and happiness not too far distant from us; my wife was stronger, brighter, looked less fearfully at the future than I had ever known her.

"One more to love me, and trust in me, Canute," she said, hugging the babe in her arms; "further and further away all the old shadows of the life that has gone."

I did not know then that nearer and nearer to us was coming the shame we deserved not, and the dishonour we could not fend off.

In the interim between the present time and my interview with Joseph, I had not been idle in my inquiries; I had made them in all directions, and taken many notes which might seem apart from the one purpose which directed me, and yet which might afford a clue to hidden motives some day. Failing in all search for Ellen, I set myself to study the downfall of Edmund Wenford, to learn how a long

course of recklessness, even profligacy, had brought him finally to ruin. To a certain extent I learned his history; he had been born in the great house that had "come to the hammer," and was well known in the Vale. Scarcely a villager in the place but had a story to tell of him and his eccentricities. I noted that the oldest folk—those who remembered him longest—spoke the most charitably of him; in the early days there were reminiscences connected with him less harsh and repulsive; one could almost trace how he went step by step downwards, knowing no moral counsellor, meeting not with one true friend.

Father and mother had both died young, and left him alone in the world, and the heir to a large property—lo! the old, old story, when the guiding reins are severed, the wilful is free to act, and the tempter is at the elbow.

"This man was not wholly bad," I thought; "if I could but find him, and throw myself upon his generosity to tell me all he knows of Ellen."

I wrote to Joseph once or twice, only to my last letter receiving an answer to the earnest question, "Was there any news?"

"No news of any importance," was his answer; "but I am watching him. Should he come to Nettlewood, watch him in your turn."

But they stayed away. The servants at Nettlewood House, and at the mansion I had planned for my wife, and which she had given up to Mrs. Ray, were on board-wages; only the new comer and family at Wenford's house gave life to the quiet village. It was a dull time, and bad for the little trade that had existence there. I visited Nettlewood but seldom; there was little to take me across the Ferry after the alterations at Mrs. Ray's were complete, save the impulse to be stirring, and the hope of learning or of finding something more that appertained to Ellen's fate. Once or twice I crossed Janet in my wanderings, but made no further appeal to her. Strong in that strange love for her master, there was little to glean from her reticence. Once or twice also Janet crossed the Gaps, and made her appearance at our cottage.

"I ha' coom to see the wee lassie," she would say, "and to make sure that ye are wull and happy, Mary Gear."

Satisfied upon this last point, and maintaining that she was well and happy herself, though her face had become very old and careworn, she would take her departure once more across the Gaps—doing the double journey in the day, as only Janet could, perhaps, and resisting all inducements to prolong her stay.

In our quiet home we should have been akin to happiness, had it not been for the thoughts of one so wholly lost to us. That grim truth stepped between us and the light; checked the laugh at times, threw over the house of rejoicing the shadow of an unutterable fear.

The shadow deepened in the early days of November—fell suddenly

athwart us, and roused me at least once more to action. Mr. Sanderson had sent me in yesterday's *Times* to read, and I was carefully studying it by the firelight that very afternoon, whilst Mary sat opposite with her sleeping baby, comfortably cradled in the chimney-corner. My mother was at her own little cottage again; welcome as she always was to us, she was a mother-in-law more wise in her generation than most mothers-in-law I have ever known or read of.

"My old-fashioned ways will not do for young folk like you—old-fashioned people never did live happily with those to whom the world is something fresher and brighter. Let me keep you in sight, and feel that I am as near to your home as your hearts, my children."

We were alone together then, sitting "between the lights" as the phrase runs. We had shared the newspaper between us in a fair and liberal manner, I coming in for the first sheet—the advertisement sheet—of the *Times*. To that portion of the paper I always turned in the first instance; in that second column, full of mysterious calls entreaties, I had a wild, visionary hope that something appertaining to my own case might appear. That something might be beyond all guessing at—it might be addressed to me, or a secret signal from Vaughan to those who were conspiring with him, or a message even from the dead to the living, telling of wrongs still unatoned for!

In that second column, on that November afternoon, there started into life that which affected me. In this shape I had not prepared for it, and I held the paper at arm's length, and groaned aloud. My wife, ever on the alert, leaped to my side at once.

"Canute, dear—what is it?"

"News—only news that affects us indirectly. An advertisement in which well-known names appear, and look somewhat strange in print."

I pointed to the advertisement, and read it again with her by the firelight. It ran as follows:—

"IN HER MAJESTY'S COURT for DIVORCE and MATRIMONIAL CAUSES.—To EDMUND WENFORD, of 'The Larches,' Nettlewood, in the parish of Henlock, in the county of Cumberland, gentleman.—Take notice, that a citation bearing date the 14th day of August, 18—, has issued under the seal of Her Majesty's Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, at the instance of Herbert Arthur Vaughan, of Nettlewood House, in the county of Cumberland, aforesaid, citing you to appear in the said court within eight days from the service thereof on you, inclusive of the day of such service, and then and there to answer the petition of the said Arthur Vaughan, praying for a dissolution of his marriage with Ellen Vaughan; and such citation contains an intimation that in default of your so doing, the said Court will proceed to hear the said petition proved in due course of law, and to pronounce sentence therein, your absence notwithstanding.—Dated this 13th November, 18—."

Here followed the signature and the address of one Walter Effet, solicitor for petitioner, Cancery Lane.

Beneath this advertisement followed a second, addressed to Ellen Vaughan, giving the same notice of issue of citation to her—appearing to me the same mockery of justice, the same part and parcel of the craftiness which progressed so surely and safely to its end.

My wife had turned very pale; in the fitful firelight I could see how white and anxious-looking she had become. Once again the past stole in and took its place with us there, the unbidden skeleton there was no shutting from us.

"What is to be done?" she murmured.

"I must go to London—to this solicitor—to my brother. I must attend this trial and hear all that they dare say of Ellen, and give the lie to them."

"You will not be rash—you will do nothing hastily, Canute."

"I must go away from here at once," I said, rising, "the place is stifling—shame and disgrace is coming to us—they are going to slander the dead!"

"Oh, my God! don't say that, Canute—I have been trying lately to believe that it may all turn out so differently."

"And in your heart what did you believe!"

She wrung her hands together, looked imploringly towards me and replied not. I answered for her.

"It was the worst! You who know best your brother's character, mistrust him most. There is no hoping against all that we know—there remains only one last effort to thwart Herbert Vaughan. I could not save her life—let me make one attempt at least to preserve her own good name."

"You will go to London?"

"Yes—at once."

"I must go with you—to take care of you," she added, with a faint smile, "I could not rest here with you away. We are hastening to the end, I am assured, Canute."

"Come with me, then—when the end comes, and I am baffled perhaps, I shall want your presence by my side to comfort me."

"Courage, my Canute—you were never a man to give way."

"No, no—I am strong yet. I will keep strong!"

We began our journey that very evening—my mother accompanying us also. She was anxious too concerning all that would be said of Ellen at the trial, all the evil speaking and slandering that would be sworn to, and to which she could never reply.

"I shall be handy as nurse to the baby also," she pleaded. "Oh! Canute, you will not tell me to remain here. Your trouble is mine, my son."

"Come then."

The desire to be stirring kept my blood at fever heat. To be acting for Ellen in some way or other; to rouse my brother Joseph

to make one last effort to stay or postpone this trial; to be stirring in the world, and striving to dash into the truth through the net-work spun round it—only to be at work again for my dead sister's sake.

I think both wife and mother trembled for me at that time—the phrensy so suddenly attacked me. I reproached myself for resting idly when there was so much to do; forgetting all that I had attempted, and all that I had endeavoured to discover. From that moment when the well-known names had started from the newspaper columns to warn me of the time so near at hand, I knew no moment's rest; I became irritable and variable; I muttered to myself, and mourned over the little time left me to act. I could think or talk of nothing else save Ellen and her husband; I forgot my past consideration for my wife, that husband's sister, and talked of the day of reparation—of the day when, face to face with the awful truth, I should confront him and set my foot upon him in his base humiliation—of the vengeance, God and man's, upon that awful crime.

My wife shrunk not away from me, but clung to me the more, and would scarcely loose me from her sight. She could not take her brother's part—she could not say one word in his defence—only once I heard her murmur in her sleep—

“I have done all this, it is my fault!”

I was becoming so wild and excited, that she warned me of my mother's watchfulness, and of all that my demeanour might betray to her. This calmed me outwardly; for awhile I had almost forgotten my past promise to let my mother believe that Ellen lived still—to let her believe in the lie which Vaughan had forged, rather than in the truth that would wholly break her heart.

When we had reached London, and had found quiet apartments in the New Road, my wife, ever solicitous, stole out of the house and brought in a medical man to see me.

“I could not rest,” she whispered, as she introduced him into the room, which I was pacing like a maniac, “I am unhappy about you. Pray forgive me.”

I must have verged upon mental derangement at that period, my actions were so strange. When the doctor told me I must keep quiet, and not give way to excitement, I laughed heartily, as at a pleasant jest; when he informed me that there was something on my mind, and I should make an effort to shake it off, or seek change of scene and employment, I laughed again; when his medicine came, I took up the bottle to shatter it against the bars of the fire-grate, when Mary suddenly arrested my hand.

“Do think more calmly, even of this, Canute,” she urged; “surely, if you are hasty and precipitate, you will mar all.”

“True.”

I took the medicine as prescribed, and fell asleep shortly afterwards, conscious of the watchful eyes of my wife upon me all the while. I was more composed when I awoke; in the morning, though the same

restlessness possessed me, my brain was cooler, and I was more prepared to act after my old fashion. To act in what manner, and in what direction?

After an early breakfast, I was thinking of setting forth in search of my brother, when he was announced.

"I have sent for him," said my wife; "I knew that you were anxious to see him, and that his coming would give you an hour or two's more rest."

"Ever considerate," I murmured; "but there is no time to rest,"

When my brother entered, and after the first greetings were exchanged, my wife and mother left us together. The door had scarcely closed upon them, when I began at once to upbraid him.

"You have not treated me well, Joseph," I said; "you have kept all information back—this trial might have taken place, and the decree of the divorce obtained, and I never the wiser."

"Upon my honour, I should have written to you to-day."

"The hearing of this case—of all these fabrications, which have been hatched together by that man and his accomplices—how can we stop it?"

"It is hard to say what is best," said my brother. "You are anxious to prevent the hearing of the case, you see."

"Why not?" I asked, sharply.

"If the case be heard, he binds himself to a statement which, in a little while, we shall be able to prove a lie. It will go all the more against him, when we face him with the truth. How he will writhe then, Canute!"

Joseph rubbed his thin hands together complacently. He was ever thinking of his own revenge—across his narrow mind the thoughts of Ellen's fame stole but seldom.

"Joseph Gear, I shall hate you presently!" I said, between my set teeth.

He looked at me in an alarmed manner, and edged his chair a little further away from me. He had been told last night of my excitement, and my wife's fears for me, and was on his guard.

"Keep cool, Canute, there's a good fellow," he remarked. "I've only a little while to stay, and cannot tell you all that I have heard, if you don't keep cool. There's business in the City, and——"

I leaped to my feet, ran to the door, and locked it. If I went beyond my usual self by that act, and verged again closely on the dangerous ground across which it is hard to return, my excitement stood me in good stead, and took Joseph wholly off his guard. He changed colour, and began to tremble.

"I will have no more of these half-confidences," I cried; "I will hear all, in return for all that I have told you. No plea of business must keep you from telling me your plans; what you, Ellen's brother, are going to do to save her name from being foully slandered in the courts of law. I will have no hanging back—I will know all that

there is to hope or fear—if you deceive me now at the last, I will have no mercy on you.”

He thought I threatened him with the terrors of the law, for the act which had beggared my mother and me; and the threat had its effect, though I was not thinking of his past duplicity.

“I—I don’t want to keep anything from you—only be cool. The doctor says you’re to be kept cool, Canute!”

“Go on.”

“And you and I are brothers, one name, one flesh, with one hope in common. I’m sure you don’t wish me any harm.”

“Go on,” I repeated.

“Well, then, I’ve found James Baines.”

“The scoundrel—where is he?”

“I knew that his relations were living here in London, and that if he ever came back from New York it was just possible he would come to see them. I knew that he would come forward as a witness on Herbert Vaughan’s side, being a man who would swear to anything, if he were handsomely paid for it. So I watched for him day after day, and set others to watch, and sure enough back he came, as I anticipated.”

“You have spoken to him?”

“Not yet—I am not quite certain whether it is policy. But I have dogged his steps, and by that means I have found the hiding place of conspirator Number Two.”

“Edmund Wenford?”

“Yes.”

“This is good news,” I said; the light breaks in upon us—we must confront them at the Divorce Court, in Ellen’s name, or we must make one great effort to stop the trial.”

“I—I think we had better stop the trial, perhaps,” he said, “it’s no good interfering. I very much doubt if we have power to interfere, or if any one would hear us.”

“How can we stop it?”

“By eliciting the truth from Wenford or Baines, and then threatening Herbert Vaughan with it, if he persist in carrying on the farce. By making quite sure that Ellen never accompanied Wenford to New York.”

“Will Wenford or Baines confess that?”

“I believe Wenford might be led to tell the truth—I fancy he has been in part the tool of others more wily than himself. If only some one could be found to prey upon the little feelings he possesses now—some one he had a respect for once.

“My wife!” I ejaculated.

“Eh!—you don’t mean that?” asked Joseph, eagerly.

“After his own fashion he loved my wife once—I know that she had influence once to turn *him* from evil thoughts respecting me.”

"That's worth knowing—that's good hearing," said Joseph, decisively.

"Where is Wenford living?"

"He is hiding from his creditors in a street near Bermondsey. I will give you his address.

He drew forth his pocket-book and scrawled a few lines in pencil on one of the blank pages, tearing out the page afterwards, and passing it to me.

"Your wife will be of valuable assistance to us, if she can move him from the purpose he has formed," he said.

"Have you seen him?"

"At a distance."

"How did you discover his hiding-place?"

"By dodging James Baines. He spends half his time passing from your brother-in-law's apartments to Wenford's."

"They are all in one plot, and have gone too far to retract," I groaned. "I see no hope to follow this."

"I am not so certain that Wenford is in the plot," said Joseph, nibbling at the corner of his pocket-book, and studying the carpet at his feet. He's a wild drunken fellow, whom Vaughan would not trust more than he could help. My belief is, that he was sent out of the way under false pretences, and may even yet have but a vague idea of the truth."

"He is as great a villain as the rest, I fear."

"Well, then, let the case be heard," said Joseph, returning to his first scheme; "it may be adjourned—I think we may get it adjourned for further evidence, and then it will be easy to act. I am going down to Nettlewood—I have another clue I think, and I only require time."

"You are thinking of that money to which your soul has been bound so long," I shouted at him again; "in your foul cupidity, those who should have been dear to you are not considered. Man, you had feelings in your breast once; you loved Ellen once; your heart *was* possible to touch. Be honest, generous, think less of yourself; teach me, by your better, nobler actions, to respect you more."

"Keep cool—keep cool, Canute. Whatever did you lock the door for?"

"We must see Wenford—failing Wenford, we must see Vaughan, and warn him that we can prove his accomplice sailed to New York, unaccompanied by our sister. I believe that man will pause, when we tell him that Ellen and he were in the Black Gap together on the 21st of July last year."

"We can't prove it. If I could only bring that home to him."

"Ellen's ring—his glove."

"The glove is no evidence, for it can't be sworn to—the ring is. Canute," dropping his voice to a whisper, "I should be more happy

in my mind if I could bring that fact to bear upon the case ; if I could prove that Vaughan went to the Gaps after his departure from Mrs. Ray's. He gains the advantage of us for a while—for *he never left his house.*"

"How do you know that ?"

"I don't think he did—I don't believe he did—I was watching the Ferry all night."

"Joseph—you have not told me all yet."

"Not quite all—I'm coming to it by degrees, but you will not keep cool, and you don't encourage confidence."

"There—I am cool enough now."

"Patience then."

He drew his chair nearer to me, and laid one hand upon my knee.

"What I am going to tell you I did not communicate at Liverpool, because I had no faith in your powers of self-command ; and a precipitate action might have put cautious people on their guard. Now, when we must both act very decisively, it is time to speak out, perhaps. Are you cool enough to listen do you think ?"

"Yes—yes."

"When Mrs. Ray had declined my hand, notwithstanding the quantity of port-wine she had drunk, I went away too disappointed and vexed to care about any rest for that night. I had taken, perhaps, a little too much myself, and fancied that a walk would do me good by the banks of the lake. I told you once that I wandered on to Henlock—this was not true. I wandered to and fro before the Inn until I heard hasty footsteps coming along the high road in the dead of night."

I held my breath with suspense ; nearer and nearer to the truth I felt advancing now.

"When I was certain that my imagination had not deceived me—keep cool, there's a good fellow!—I hid myself in the shadow of the house, and waited for the mystery to clear up. The footsteps approached and came on towards the Ferry. I peered out, and saw plainly enough through the haziness of the night a woman at the water-side, striving with impatient fingers to loosen the cord that secured the ferry-boat to the landing-stage. The cord was fastened in a way she did not understand, and with some sharp instrument I saw her cut it through, and, springing into the boat, seize an oar, and push herself away from land. Her face was turned towards me as she did so, and the moon broke out for a moment, and lit it up in all its ghastliness."

"And that face ?"

"Was Janet's—the Scotchwoman—the *murderess of Ellen!*"

CHAPTER IV.

PUSHING FORWARD.

THIS was unprepared for. A new element of mystery in the story which had deepened, and the threads of which were hard to follow. A stern truth looming nearer to us, and casting all into a darkness denser than before.

"Janet!" I repeated.

Much that had been incomprehensible in her conduct flashed upon me after my brother's avowal; much that had seemed inconsistent with that honesty of purpose in which my wife believed, recurred to me at once. Her seeming love for my wife, and yet her refusal to leave Nettlewood House and its master; Ellen's dislike to her, and belief that she was a spy; her strangeness of demeanour; her persistent defence of Herbert Vaughan whenever attacked by me; the change that had come over her since Ellen's disappearance; the strange moods, irreconcilable with anything save the deep damning guilt of blood upon her hands.

I thought of her careful watch over my wife in the long illness that followed the mystery, and attributed her conduct then not so much to the love she experienced for Mary, as to the desire to stand between me and Mary's confession of the vileness of her brother's nature. I thought I saw all then clearly to the end; this woman had been Vaughan's tool, and obeyed his handiwork, or guessed at all that he had acted for himself. Ellen had seen her danger, and crossed the water by the private boat attached to Nettlewood House; Janet had flown to intercept her on her way through the Black Gap—a route better known to her than even to my sister.

"Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Very little. I was surprised at the action, but felt it unaccountable. I continued hidden, and watched her pass across the lake. When she took up the oar, she laid a pistol on the seat beside her. Her face was like a ghost's—there was an awful determination on it, in the moonlight. I saw her row into the stream, the moon became hidden again, and half way across the water, I lost sight of her. Three quarters of an hour afterwards, I heard the report of a pistol in the Black Gap mountains. That's the story—what do you think of it?"

"Did you watch for Janet's return?"

"Till the daylight came—then I gave her up."

"It is all incomprehensible to me," I muttered; "the truth goes

further away, and the mists of which Ellen warned me close round me still more densely."

"I am going at once to Nettlewood to prey on Janet's fears. I think I may be able to learn something from her—coming upon her by surprise."

"I have attempted to learn the truth from her myself."

"Ah! but you have not had the same tools to work with—leave it to me this time," he added with no little egotism.

"Meanwhile, I am to tempt Wenford with Mary. Failing Wenford, I shall visit Vaughan."

"As you will," said Joseph, reluctantly; "it may be just possible to scare him away from his application for a divorce. If Janet confesses to anything, I shall telegraph to you—we may find another weapon to attack that scoundrel with."

"I would not have you build too much upon Janet."

"I shall take her off her guard."

I unlocked the door, evidently to Joseph's relief; he had never taken his eyes off me since my first exhibition of passion; he seemed to breathe freer when the door was opened.

"I—I hope you will do nothing hastily, Canute," he said, almost imploringly. I think if we go cautiously to work, we shall catch my gentleman yet. Be careful with Wenford whilst I am away."

"And remember we may be wrong concerning Janet," I said.

I remembered her past kindness to my wife before her marriage—all those little traits of character which showed her love and interest, and experienced a revulsion of feeling on the instant; I could not connect the disappearance of Ellen with any act of Janet Muckersie. And then there returned Joseph's story to me, and the light died out again.

Joseph took his departure after again warning me, and again inquiring at the street door whether I really thought it better to interfere with the first hearing of the divorce case.

"I should like to know how far he would go, Canute," he said, almost submissively.

"If that man would repent at the eleventh hour, confess his sins and go his way, I could almost forgive him for my wife's sake," I replied.

"Ah! almost—not when you stood face to face with him at Ellen's grave?"

"No—not then!" I cried fiercely.

Joseph put up his umbrella and stepped into the wet streets. He went two or three steps away, and then returned before I had closed the door upon him.

"Canute," he said, in a changed voice, a voice more full of earnestness than I had listened to before in him, "you don't respect me much. You think I am all for money, and care little for poor Ellen. It isn't so—upon my soul, it isn't! I know the value of money,

and have sinned for it—perhaps sold my soul to the devil for it, it is possible; but I always loved Ellen—she was my favourite of all of you.

He went away after that confession, and left me looking after him, struggling with the wind and rain. I scarcely understood this sudden outburst of sympathy, after the careful fencing—the over-caution—that had preceded it. And yet I did not doubt its genuineness, for I did not believe in Joseph's power to feign a real emotion. At the last moment, parting from me to go on a long journey, the better nature which had rusted in him gave one little leap forward to show me that he was not wholly sordid, and that in the midst of much that was ignoble there was a grain or two of gold.

I returned to the room I had quitted, to find my wife anxiously expecting my return. She was looking very pale and agitated.

"What has happened afresh, Canute, dear?" she asked; "you are driving yourself wild again with this one awful thought. He has been here to disturb you once more."

"Mary, we are advancing swiftly to the truth, I hope. I must hope that, though your brother meet his fate with it."

"Canute, for my sake, I know that you will spare *him* when the time comes—that you will leave him to his God. I have been thinking of him much lately," she added, "thinking that after all we may both be wrong in our estimation of his motive."

"He is a forger."

"Yes."

"You believe that he attempted your life once?"

"Don't speak of the past. I have been all my life trying to shut it from me, Canute."

"You do not think that Ellen fled with Wenford?"

"I do not."

"Then that is the mystery actuating every movement of your brother? What reason for this cruel slandering of the dead—what wheel within a wheel slowly turning to our discomfiture and shame have we not a right to stop?"

"You have heard more?"

"Much that makes the mystery still difficult to solve. Mary, I have heard that Janet is implicated in my sister's disappearance."

"I will never believe it!" cried Mary, starting up. "Janet, my old nurse, my faithful friend, the shield between me and all the dangers that I feared once!"

"She crossed the ferry on the night Ellen disappeared—my brother saw her come down to the water's-edge loose the boat, and push herself away from land."

"For what motive?" cried my wife.

"Mary, do you believe it possible that in her wild faithfulness for your brother, she would have sided with him against *her*?" I have

heard you say that she was a woman who would die for either of you, if need were; is it possible that Ellen's life meant Herbert Vaughan's discomfiture, and that she spared it not when the hour came to act?"

"No, no, I will not believe it!" cried Mary again; "all my life I have not been so deceived. Canute, you and I will never be happy again until we know the truth, however hard or cruel. I see that now."

"Leave it to me."

"No!" she answered firmly, "I must work with you. You have thought to spare me by concealing, as far as possible, the troubles which perplexed you, but it was a kindness that kept my brain disturbed, and did no good to you. Let us attempt the truth together, and if it prove the vileness of those I love, or those in whom I have trusted, I will ask you at least to be merciful for my sake. But you must trust in me utterly now, and tell me all your sorrows. By sharing them, I hope to lighten them eventually. Why, Canute, I am stronger than you are now!"

It was the best plan after all. So I told her, for the first time, the history of my struggles to arrive at the secret of her brother's actions. I spoke of my long search; of the evidence that Ellen had been in the Black Gap Pass on the night when it was stated she had fled with Wenford; I related the particulars of Joseph Gear's plans. I held nothing back. My wife and I faced the past and gathered strength by being with each other, and possessing no secrets from each other. In keeping all that had perplexed me from her, I had not acted wisely, when the time had passed in which a shock might have robbed us of the hope now hallowing our marriage. The child was born, and I made my wife my confidante. I spoke of Ellen boldly, and spared not her brother. Mary was my second self, and it was strange to believe in her power to strengthen me.

And had I not believed in vain; my own approximation to a mental prostration that had alarmed her, brought her to my side, the comforter in whom I had no trust till then. I thought that my task was ever to comfort *her* by my consoling words, to make her happy by treasuring within my own breast all things likely to disturb her; I had never pictured giving way myself, of the one idea becoming too heavy to withstand, and my requiring all her love and tenderness to keep me strong.

My weakness had dissipated hers; when there is danger to the loved one, the true woman steps forth to defend.

I told Mary of the discovery of Wenford's lodgings, possibly his hiding-place, and that method of action which Joseph Gear had suggested she considered best at once.

"Your brother is right," she said; "and although it is a weak hope, still it is the only one left us. We must seek the truth at all hazards for Ellen's sake—for yours. Let us go at once."

She was impatient to be enacting her own share in the search—for

my sake now she would make every effort to arrive at the truth; for her sake, I was to be merciful to Herbert Vaughan or Janet, when the truth was facing us.

Leaving the child with my mother—ever the most careful of nurses—we set forth in a cab to Bermondsey. The rain was still steadily and heavily descending; from the sullen sky overhead was to be read no augury of fine weather for some time to come—people made the best of circumstances, and dashed through it, in lieu of loitering under archways, door-portals, and shop-blinds. New Road way, there were but few pedestrians in the streets. Over the bridge, and making for Bermondsey, the scene changed. In the poorer world through which we were driven, the rain seemed to have but little effect on the crowds of people whom business had brought out that day; women were chaffering at every corner, with other women coolly seated in the rain at vegetable and fish-stalls; lank, hungry-looking children raced across the roadways, swam corks in the gutters, sauntered about with bare feet on the wet pavements, fought, screamed, and ran against people; men out of work were smoking their pipes composedly, with their backs against lamp-posts or gin-shop doors; one man was striking at his wife for trying to persuade him to come home; a woman was being taken to the station-house for filching bacon from a shop-board, and a mob of sympathists was following her and her official escort down the middle of the road, where the mud was a foot deep.

"This is London indeed," whispered my wife, drawing closer to me, with her old fear of things strange and new.

The cabman had a difficulty in finding the address which my brother had given me some time previously; but, by dint of many inquiries, we arrived at last before a row of one-storied brick houses, hemmed in by tan-pits and railway arches.

"This is Dynaston Street, sir."

"Stop at No. 10."

At No. 10 I sprang out, and announced my arrival at the door. A dirty-faced, slip-shod woman answered my summons thereat.

"Mr. Wenford is lodging here?" I said.

"No, sir."

"No matter—a gentleman is lodging here whom I wish to see."

"Mr. Smith, do you mean, sir?"

"Yes, Smith. A tall man, with——"

"With the ague—yes, sir, that's him. I'm a-going out marketing myself—will you please to shut the door when you leave him, and don't shut the string in, please, sir. He's in the upstairs front—I think he's expecting you."

"Indeed."

"He said a gentleman would very likely call to-day to see him. You won't forget to shut the door, and leave the string out, sir?"

And, with this last injunction, the lady of the house, with her

hair dishevelled, and her cap trailing down her back, went out into the street, perfectly disregarding of the inclemency of the weather,

I opened the cab-door, and assisted my wife to alight. Perceiving that she had become very pale, I asked her if she would leave the rest of the adventure to me.

"No, Canute," she replied, "I shall be strong enough to face the worst. I am to act, not you, remember; and I am only fearful of our meeting Herbert here."

"We need not fear him if we do."

We closed the door after us, and went up a flight of creaking stairs to the door of the front room. Here I knocked, and here the well-known voice—harsh and resonant as ever—called out, "Come in."

I turned the handle of the door, and Mary and I entered. A figure, very tall, but very wasted, sat, or rather crouched, in an old-fashioned leathern chair, before a charcoal fire. A thin, sallow face, half smothered by beard and moustache, was turned towards the door as we entered; its whole expression changed to one of astonishment at our approach.

An oath escaped him in the first instance; he raised himself with some difficulty by pressing his hands on the elbows of the chair, stared at us, and then sat down again, with a half groan, and began to shiver violently.

"Who the devil would have thought to see you two here, in this house?" he said.

"Are we welcome, Mr. Wenford?" I asked.

"I can't say that you are. If you've come to pump anything from me—me who was always the hardest nut to crack in England—you're not welcome, and you've come a long distance out of your way for nothing."

"We came as friends, Mr. Wenford," remarked my wife; "we come for you to help us in a great distress."

He laughed hoarsely at this, and edged his chair nearer to the fire.

He looked from me to her with some degree of interest, and then laughed and shivered again—ceasing his laugh to anathematize his shivering in the most forcible language.

"Stay," he said, at last, "that you have come to rejoice over my downfall—to croak forth how true the world was in its prophecy that Mad Wenford was going to the devil head-foremost. My old father left me a fine fortune, and I threw it all to the dogs—is that so odd a story in these times, Gear?"

"Not very odd—but very pitiable."

"Stop that!" he shouted; "I always hated pity in any shape or form; I always abominated a fellow taking pity upon me. I was my own master, and if I went the wrong way, why I don't know that there's any one to blame but myself. Now, what do you two want here?"

"Cannot you guess?" I asked, sternly.

"I put a question—I don't want it stopped by another—that's a

trick I'm deep enough to see through. Every cunning knave has had the idea that I was mad enough to be duped, and I have let them think so for my own purposes, sometimes, and got the better of them in the long run. Now, what do you want here?"

"Mr. Wenford," said my wife, approaching him, and holding forth her hand, "you and I, at least, have been always friends."

"Ah! we might have been more than friends once, if that fellow hadn't turned up," pointing to me.

"Say that we are friends still—that you, who once wished me every peace and happiness, will not, by your silence, wreck them both, sir?"

"Are *you* unhappy?" he asked, wonderingly.

"My husband's life is mine, and his is one distracted by a great fear. I am unhappy to think that his name should be dishonoured, that his sister—sleeping in her grave, sir—should not be spared the foulest of all calumnies that can disgrace a woman."

"Sleeping in her grave?" he repeated; "who says that, now?"

"I say it."

"I am never to know all," he muttered; "I am to be told just as much as seems sufficient for some purpose or other, which is not explained to me. When did she die?"

"She was murdered on the night you and James Baines went through the Triesdale Pass," I answered.

He started, but made no response. My presence there was objectionable to him; I was associated with his greatest disappointment, and in his low estate he loved me none the better. Before he turned his face away from me, I saw hate and anger in his deep-set eyes.

"What does he mean about murdered, Mary Gear?" he asked.

"You know of whom we are talking?"

He nodded.

"Ellen—my brother's wife."

"Yes."

"She disappeared on the same night that you left Nettlewood: her flight was coupled with that of yours—your names are still mentioned together as a guilty couple who betrayed my brother's honour."

He lay back in his chair and shivered more and more. The ague-fit was on him, and he could not hold a limb still.

"I know all this," he gasped, "it's no news to me."

"Will you, in remembrance of the better times when you professed a love for me," urged my wife, "confirm our suspicions that Miss Vaughan did not fly with you to New York—did not in any way deserve the foul names bestowed upon her? Are you, a gentleman—a man well born, well educated—so lost to all sense of what is right or just, as to let the lie go further, defaming you as well as her—have you so altered, Wenford, as to be bribed to such a cruel infamy—you I respected, almost loved, once!"

"Say that again!" he cried, his eyes lighting up, his wild face all aglow at her assertion.

"Wenford, let me tell you that truth, of which my husband is aware—which I am not ashamed to own. Years ago, when you asked me to be your wife, I was miserable and unhappy, and only you pitied that unhappiness and loved me for it. For that I almost loved you in return—had you been a man to whom I could have trusted my future, I should have married you."

"You would have committed suicide," he answered; "after all, it was better that I lost you, though you were the one chance to make me a good man, and it went by and left me what I am. This is a wreck enough, Mrs. Gear—moral enough for any canting story-book."

"I am sorry to see you thus reduced."

"You had always a feeling heart. Thank you."

"But I should hate and despise you, if it were a truth that you were reduced to that infamy with which the world would brand you. Wenford, I believe better of you than that; I ask you to strengthen me in that belief."

"For *his* sake?" with a half-glance towards me.

"No, for mine."

"It is better to say nothing," he said, after a visible struggle to resist this last appeal; "I can say nothing to make you more happy. I am a coward, who has consented to play the villain's part—what does it matter," with a stamp of his foot, "what I do now?"

"You are the dupe of a man more cunning than yourself! All his life you have been a slave to him."

"It suits my purpose now at least. How horribly cold it is!—what an unearthly noise the rain makes beating against the glass!"

"Then you will tell me nothing, Wenford?"

"I can tell you nothing that would make your heart more light," he answered, "so I will keep my own counsel. Please go now, you're like a spirit to me, and freeze every drop of blood in my veins. I daren't look at you again."

"Wenford, will you let me be the judge of what is good or bad news to me. Rather than you keep a cruel silence, I will go down on my knees and beg you to speak out."

"No—don't do that!" he cried, tottering to his feet with undisguised alarm; "I'm only a child now, and you'll floor me completely if you do that."

"You wish this divorce case to proceed—you will not defend your own name, but by a bribe let the honest world scout you in the streets."

"For a bribe!" he shouted, then dropped into the chair again, and covered his face with his hands; "well, yes, yes—it's as bad as that!"

"You confess it."

"You wish to stop this case for your husband's sister's sake. By

some unaccountable means you have found me out to tell me *this!*”

“Yes.”

“But if it be for the best that the case proceeds and sets your sister free? If it be your sister’s wish to take her share of disgrace, rather than be tied to Herbert Vaughan for life?”

“If it were true, I would wish to stay it—but if she were living and acting for such a purpose, I would despise her,” cried Mary; “Edmund Wenford, can you swear to me that Ellen lives?”

“I have *his* word for it.”

“Do you believe that she of all women would consent to this odious compact? Are you so much my brother’s slave as to be blinded by this vile falsehood?”

“Well—it never struck me—I have not seen it in that light. If that Vaughan has again thrown dust in my eyes, I’ll—I’ll—”

He paused to struggle with his ague-fit, and pointed with his trembling hand to a glass containing some liquor on the mantel-piece. Mary reached it and held it to his lips.

After a while he was more composed; more like his old self. There was a sternness about his brows which showed the man strong to resist yet.

“If he be trying to deceive me—hiding me here, while he works on and fears no opposition—I may turn on him at the last. Sit down here, and tell me your story, beginning from the date of my escape from Nettlewood.”

Mary did so, and he sat and listened patiently, taking no heed of me, a watcher of this strange interview. When I once broke into correct some little error of statement which my wife had unwittingly fallen, he bade me be silent.

Mary related how the first news of the alleged elopement was brought to her, and by what bearer; spoke of the letter which Wenford had written to her brother, and which he read that morning of the discovery—of my long search and her illness, of my tracking him to Liverpool, of the many reasons which we both had for believing Ellen had come to an untimely end.

Wenford was silent till the last words had escaped my wife’s lips, then he dashed his hand upon the leathern chair-arm with a violence which startled both of us.

“If he had been true to me, if he had kept faith with me, I would have gone side by side with him in his villainy to the last—but I will stand no more of it! I trusted in him, and he deceived me—gaining his ends, I can see that he will throw me off, and deceive me again! Mr. Gear,” turning to me for the first time, “I have been a miserable villain all my life, but not the wretch that he would make me out. Hasty and reckless but not crafty and subtle. I did not elope with your sister.”

“I knew it—I was sure of it.”

"I did not know that it was intended that the world should think so, until I was back in London two months since—I knew nothing of your sister, or of his plans concerning her and me, until I came back penniless and ague-stricken to London."

"But that letter which you wrote to Vaughan on the night of your flight."

"Do you remember the words?"

"All of them."

"Will you repeat them?"

I repeated them at his request. Every word of his letter, like every word of that epistle falsely attributed to Ellen, had been burned into my memory. I had no need to ask for the copies Vaughan had promised me.

"'Forgive me and my betrayal of a trust,' your letter began," I quoted, "'but the tides too strong for me. For the sake of our old friendship, I have fought an unequal fight and am vanquished. I am really Mad Wenford now—to all intents and purposes as raving mad as any lunatic from Hanwell. Ellen accompanies me. NEW WENFORD.'"

"I see—I see!" cried Wenford, when I had concluded; "yes, I am no match for Herbert Vaughan—his cunning is Satanic. I wrote that letter at his dictation, barring the words 'Ellen accompanies me,'—he put them in afterwards, to further his own purposes. Now let me own what a villain I am."

He seemed to struggle with a threatening return of his ague, and to master it. He addressed himself to me now, and my wife sat at his side, pale and anxious, and unremarked by him. He would not own to her what a villain he had been!

"He and I went partners in a mine, by way of a last dash for riches, ere we were both reduced to beggary. The mine was a failure, and the creditors were ready to swoop down upon us both. There were left some thousands at the bankers, and he persuaded me to let the world suppose I had suddenly decamped with them, foreseeing the ruin there was in store for us. That would leave a considerable amount of money less for the creditors, and on the night of Mrs. Ray's ball we shared that amount, and I wrote the letter exculpating him. He worded it so that it should refer to Ellen, and so played a double game, in which that two-faced knave, Jem Baines, assisted him. We left Liverpool for New York on the 24th of July."

"And the woman calling herself Ellen Vaughan who sailed by that ship?"

"A woman picked up by Baines, and paid to take her passage out in your sister's name. She was thrown in my way during the voyage—but only by Baines' own confession has that truth lately come to my knowledge."

"Why have you returned to England?"

"I spent my money—squandered it after the old fashion, and then returned, simply for the reason that I was tired of America. When I came back here, I discovered the plot, and went in search of Herbert Vaughan, who had been very busy during my absence. Then the explanation came; it had been Ellen's wish to separate from her husband; they had planned between them the scheme, which Vaughan confided to me. Ellen had flirted with me at Nettlewood to give a colour to the story, it was said; she left Nettlewood on the same night as myself, to make the end more credible; she is willing to lose her good name rather than be in his power ever again. Vaughan is anxious to marry Letty Ray, from whose fortune I am to receive ten thousand pounds, the price of my silence in this matter. James Baines is to be the witness ready to swear that he accompanied us to America. And all this is not arranged between man and wife, you believe?"

"I believe it firmly."

"I thought it was his wife's wish as well as his—I had heard of such cases before, and had become too much of a wretch to be shocked at this one—there was money to be earned by keeping silent, and the thought of murder never crossed me for a moment. Even now," he added, dubiously, "Herbert Vaughan's story is more feasible than yours—only, only, there *was* a look in Mrs. Vaughan that was above all this."

"Above it—yes,"

"And I never made war against a woman—damn it, I never plotted against a woman's happiness in my life—I was never so bad as that after all!"

He turned quite proudly towards my wife, as though that assertion extenuated all the evil of which he had been guilty.

"I thought it all had been arranged, and was better for all parties concerned—but if it has not been arranged, then," sinking his voice, "there has been foul play, and I have done with Herbert Vaughan. Scamp as I am, there is a line at which even *I* stop. The more I think of it," he added, his brow contracting, "the more I see what a madman I am to let that man have the handling of my name, and keep his own so pure before the world. Why, the Wenfords were always the best family—he is only the son of a solicitor!"

It was pitiful boasting, at which he laughed hollowly the moment afterwards. The mockery of this poor pride struck home even to him.

"I'll not say anything more against him," he said after a pause, during which he had begun to tremble violently again, "I'll hold my own and stand my ground now. I don't know by facts whether he or you are right, but if he do not give you his wife's address, or send it to me by your hands, within six hours from your meeting with him, I defend my case as co-respondent in the Divorce Court. By —!"

he took an awful oath here, "that will startle him somewhat, and foil him with his own weapons. A good scheme—a good scheme!"

"He may seek you out, and try to explain it—he may impose upon you again."

"He will be here presently—he promised me to call this morning at eleven."

"It is past one."

"Ah! he will not come then—he hangs back, and don't like too many questions asked. He is putting me off, and every day is of moment to us. When is the case announced for hearing?"

"In four days' time."

"I will leave here at once, and alarm him by my disappearance. Why shouldn't I try his nerves a little, as he has tried mine? Where shall I go?"

"We will find you a lodging adjacent to our house in the New Road."

"Don't let him know where I am—if that man were driven at bay, I wouldn't answer for my life. I'm not so strong as I used to be, and this is an ugly neighbourhood."

The new fear appeared to unnerve him; he sat and struggled with his weakness. Looking at him helpless and trembling there, I could scarce believe this was the fierce iron-hearted being I had known at Nettlewood. He had appeared much changed when we first came upon him in his miserable lodging; now that he had lost all confidence in Vaughan, and was impressed by a belief in Ellen's death, he was but the shadow of his former self—bewildered by all that he and we had attempted to explain. And after all, the clouds were still as dense, and Ellen still as far away! Before us only lay the chance of adjourning or defending the divorce case—of scaring Herbert Vaughan from his secure position, and keeping Ellen's name still spotless. Wenford was anxious to begone—to accompany us at once.

"It's bad weather for me to be out, but I can't stop here—I won't stop here any longer. Let us go at once, before my resolution gives way. I was always Mad Wenford, never in one mood ten minutes together. What a life mine has been!"

He was becoming childish, or the medicine on the mantel-piece was powerful, and affected his head a little.

"Who attends you for the ague?" I asked, almost involuntarily.

"Not Herbert Vaughan," he said, quickly enough; "no, no!" with a laugh, "his friends die much too suddenly for me!"

He noticed my wife's hand suddenly press itself to her heart, and he said, with some of that gentlemanly courtesy which he had exhibited more than once in the past days:

"Pardon me, Mrs. Gear—but I did not mean to pain you."

We went out of the room together—I wondering at the many changes in his moods which he had exhibited during the interview,

and fearing that from his natural instability all might yet be marred. I was anxious to lure him from that house, and startle his accomplice by his disappearance. It would be one great step gained on our side, at least—and Vaughan had held the winning hand till then.

"Is there any money owing to the landlady?"

"No—I pay her in advance."

"Are you in want of money?"

"When I am, I may ask you," he said, with his old bluntness.

He tottered about the room like an old man, collecting a few scraps of wearing apparel together from a chest of drawers in one corner of the room, and crowding them into a portmanteau, which his shaking fingers were unable to lock. He was ready at last, shrouded to the eyes in a thick heavy cloak.

We descended the stairs—the house was still empty—the cabman tired of waiting on the box in the rain, had got into his vehicle and fallen fast asleep there. He emerged from the cab at our request, and mounted the box; I closed the street-door after us, and left the string outside as the landlady had requested; we entered the cab, and were driven back towards the New Road.

Crossing one of the crowded Bermondsey thoroughfares, we were detained a moment by a street-fight, and a mob of excited lookers-on. I glanced from the window for an instant, and saw James Baines standing a little aloof, and deeply interested in the proceedings. That street-fight had saved us, perhaps, for as I watched I saw Baines suddenly turn away and proceed at a very rapid pace in the direction of the house we had quitted.

CHAPTER V

WATCHING AND COUNTER-WATCHING.

HAVING safely placed Mad Wenford in lodgings contiguous to our own, and seen to those common comforts, which, from choice or necessity, he appeared to have denied himself, it was left me to still further prosecute my plans for arresting the progress of the divorce case. There was at least the hope of gaining time, which was valuable now to Ellen's fame.

I was anxious to proceed at once to Vaughan's house in London, but Mary was also anxious concerning me, and begged me to do

nothing rashly. The impulse had been given me to proceed again, and every minute lost was to be regretted by me. I could scarcely eat the dinner which Mary's thoughtfulness insisted upon placing before me, ere I ventured forth, strong in my new hope to baffle Vaughan.

Mary would have accompanied me, but I was firm in my resolution to undertake this part of my task alone. All that I wished to say to her brother was better without her presence as a witness. She had fulfilled a fair share of work that day; furthermore, she had risked her health in venturing forth in this inclement weather.

It was five o'clock when I was ready to depart; the night was coming on, and the rain was still descending heavily.

"I cannot bear you out of my sight, Canute," she urged. "You promised me that we should work together from this time forth."

"Ever together, Mary, sharing one common trouble," I answered; "but to-night your post is here. There is nothing gained, and only your brother put more upon his guard by your presence at my side. We must never be both absent from home, now Wenford is near us."

She let me go my way reluctantly; her fear of me had not yet abated; the one idea that drove me forwards was less to be fought against than ever. But I had grown stronger with it; further proof of all that I had hitherto but guessed at, had braced my nerves to go on to the end, fearing no break down by the way. I saw the end looming before me, dark and horrible, and the full light of day upon the ghastly mystery; my near approach gave me an unnatural courage, which I felt would not die out until Vaughan or I remained the victor. Afterwards the re-action might test my strength more forcibly, but the worst would have been faced, and I should have done my duty to one hidden securely from me now.

"I may be late—don't sit up," were my last injunctions to Mary, who parted from me with a wistful look.

"You will be careful—you will keep ever on your guard, Canute?"

"Trust me."

So we parted, and I proceeded through the rain and wind to the residence of Herbert Vaughan. I preferred to walk every step of the way to the West-end hotel at which my brother-in-law was residing for a time, and the address of which had been furnished me by Wenford. Though the night was stormy and dark, I preferred walking onwards at a rapid pace; I could not sit still, and let a host of thoughts bewilder me—I must hurry on with it, and keep in action, for my brain's sake. Strong and energetic as I felt, I was less calm; sitting for five minutes motionless, disturbed me. I was impelled onwards by a force that I was powerless to cope with—the force that rendered rest a misery to me.

I reached the hotel, and was informed that Mr. Vaughan had been absent about an hour. Did anyone know when he would return? The porter thought not, but would inquire of Mr. Vaughan's valet. Mr. Vaughan's valet made his appearance after a while—a sleek-faced, straight-haired, young man, whom I had not seen before.

“Did I wish to see Mr. Vaughan very particularly?”

“Very particularly indeed.”

“Should I excuse him, but he had only been in Mr. Vaughan's service two days, and was going down to Nettlewood with him presently. Was my name Wenford?”

I nodded my head. The man brightened up at once.

“Mr. Vaughan wished to see Mr. Wenford very particularly. Would Mr. Wenford wait in his apartments till his return, or, if pressed for time, ask for him of the box-keeper at the Haymarket Theatre?”

“I am pressed for time—I will follow Mr. Vaughan.”

The valet bowed, and looked vacantly after me. The porter opened the swing glass entrance doors, and bowed me down the great stone flight of steps; I went on in the wind and rain to the theatre, where this man could find the will and heart to go.

To the box-entrance, where I inquired if a Mr. Vaughan had left any directions as to the number of his box. Mr. Vaughan had taken a private box yesterday, and was then in the house. Did I wish to see him? Presently. I took a ticket for the first tier, and presented myself in the lobby for admittance. The box-keeper looked very dubiously at my muddy trousers and boots, and was evidently far from struck with the eligibility of my claims for admittance.

“Put me in a back seat for a moment. I am not going to stop,” I said.

“Back seat—yes, sir—thank you.”

Relieved in his mind, the box-keeper opened the door, and indicated a seat at the back of the dress-circle. The audience was absorbed in the performance on the stage, and my appearance, soiled and disreputable as it was, did not attract any attention. I took my seat, and looked round the first tier; in a private box near the stage was the object of my search—the man who had so influenced my life. He was seated between two ladies—the one in black silk on his right hand, with the scarlet wreath crossing her raven hair, there was no difficulty in recognising as Letty Ray, much as she had altered since my first acquaintance with her. On his left was the lady who had acted as governess to Letty, and was still resident with her as companion.

Herbert Vaughan seemed in good spirits; the disappearance of Wenford did not apparently affect him much, or rouse greatly his suspicions. Probably he knew by this time that a lady and gentle-

man had called for Wenford in his miserable lodgings, and taken him away with them; and it was not difficult to guess who were likely to be the agents in that affair. If he were perplexed by our conduct, he bore his embarrassment well, and was at his ease at that moment by the side of the heiress, whose fortune he coveted. I felt a grim satisfaction in sitting there unperceived—an opponent advancing to make one last desperate effort to thwart all the evil he had planned. Life had flown smoothly on with him, and he had planned and plotted with but little opposition—in his dark career he had found many tools; at every turn of the road came friends to trust him, and believe in him.

Sitting there facing me, it was difficult to think him a villain even then; his whole appearance was deceptive. A fair-haired handsome man, clever and accomplished, with the gift of winning hearts by the same manners which were as false as he, and hid so much that was foully treacherous.

He sat there by Miss Ray's side, her acknowledged lover, ere the links that bound him to another had ostensibly been broken; and she, whose latter-day studies should have taught her better, saw neither the boldness nor the shame of it. He was paying more attention to her than to the performance on the stage, and her interest was for him, not for the sparkling comedy which had crowded the house that night. All her life had been spent in loving Vaughan; she had vowed to love him in the face of a treachery that should have set him far apart from her for ever. I believed that nothing which the world could say would ever have power to wean her from him.

Whence arose this man's influence over the female heart—this fascination, as it were, of his serpent's glance? It had never affected me; in the early days before I knew the evil at his heart, I had distrusted him; and yet my sister Ellen, a girl not easily deceived, quick to detect the real from the false, was taken in the toils, and thus made the great error of her life. Looking at him then, watching every movement as he sat there, I could believe that he was less an actor than a man who lost all consciousness of himself in the object of the present hour. It was not acting; it was reality. It had been his business to fall in love with Letty Ray, and for the time it *was* love—the same love which, in its fervour and passing truth, had deceived so cruelly his wife. In that hour, he thought no more of his victim, or of the blood upon his head—no matter whether Ellen were slain by his hand, or Janet Muckersie's. He was a man who framed a purpose for his own advancement, his own security—and then dashed at it, caring not for law or human life. The time was coming to meet him on the road he was pursuing, and do my best to baffle him. He or I must surely fall in the time but a little distant from us both.

I left the box as the act-drop descended, and made my way to

the other side of the house, in search of the box-keeper. I was forestalled in my search by Vaughan himself, who came rapidly along the lobby, and would have passed me had I not caught his arm.

"Mr. Vaughan, I am in search of you."

He compressed his lips together—the only sign of being taken by surprise.

"We meet at strange times, and in strange places, Mr. Gear," he said; "you will excuse me, but I have a friend to visit in the dress-circle, and cannot stop an instant now."

"I have spent much time in searching for you, and my business is important."

"This is no place for important business," he said, coldly; "call at my hotel in the morning."

"I wish to speak of the divorce you are anxious to obtain."

"I will not speak of it to *you*," he said, fiercely.

"It must be stopped."

"There is no power on earth or in heaven to stop it," he cried; "I tell you I have willed it. Let me pass."

"I have been slowly gathering my proofs together, Mr. Vaughan—I do not believe that you dare to face them at the last. I wish to speak of those proofs, and to warn you that you are courting your own destruction by following this scheme to the end."

"If you have anything to say to me, or warn me of, call at the hotel in the morning. I promise you to hear all that you have to tell me then—I swear that I will not listen to a word more here! You have tracked me like a hound, you have set spies upon my path, you have sought, by every petty meanness, to fasten a great crime upon me; you have lured away this very day Ellen's accomplice to tamper with—you are my enemy!"

"Be it so—your enemy if you will. You were my sister's—I accept the name."

"I will see you to-morrow. Candidly, I am anxious to see you—to know what I have to face, and to warn you of all that may overwhelm you if you stand longer in my path. I will be at home to-morrow morning at ten."

"At ten—I will be there."

I saw that it was useless to continue the conversation there, and I saw that he would keep his word and meet me. Our altercation in the box lobby had already turned more than one wondering pair of eyes towards us, and he had raised his voice as if for the purpose of attracting undue attention. I knew that time was valuable to him—that in four days the trial of Ellen's honour would occur, but I felt that I could afford to wait till the morning rather than attempt an explanation in the theatre. I had not proof enough yet to break through his net of circumstance, and I scarcely dared defy him. If he would listen patiently to me, I might, by cautious fencing, arouse

his fears, and make him pause awhile. I wanted time, for I felt that with it would come back Ellen's innocence to me.

He left me, and I went immediately out of the theatre, where the wind and the rain met me with their old violence. A terrible night for those afoot; such a night as I scarcely remembered before that time, and only equalled by the nights which followed it. For the wet was of long continuance, and night and day for the greater part of that week, kept steadily and unceasingly on, till people despaired of the sunshine ever again.

I walked home. My head ached and my blood was at fever heat; the rain that dashed upon me came as a relief, and I feared no danger from it. The squares and streets I crossed in my passage to the New Road were almost deserted that night; now and then a man or woman, cowering under an umbrella, flitted by me; once a drunken woman asked for alms from the shadow of a doorway; occasionally a policeman in oil-skin cape and great-coat, gruffly bade me good-night, or looked suspiciously after me, according to the impression my appearance made upon him.

In the New Road at last, and thinking of Mary's face brightening up at my early return. She was anxious about me: she had grave fears for my health; out of her sight, and to her nervous mind, I was in the midst of danger which might strike me down—it was pleasant to think of her welcome leap towards me when I stood once more in the house which we had christened home for the nonce. I had walked on the opposite side of the way, intending to look in upon Wenford, whose apartments almost faced my own, before proceeding home. This intention I changed when it recurred to me that Vaughan had already guessed that I had discovered Wenford, and might have possibly set his emissaries to watch my house and neighbourhood. For the present, and until I had had an interview with Vaughan, perhaps it was best that I should not visit Wenford. I passed by the house and went on, looking across the wide road towards the lighted blind which I should not have been surprised to find drawn aside, and Mary at her post there, waiting in the hope of seeing me pass the last gas lamp on the opposite side of the way. But no one was there; it was not ten o'clock, and I had given no hope of my return before that hour.

I was preparing to cross the road, when I became aware of a figure standing in the deep recess of the doorway of my house, standing back in the shadow, where no light could fall upon it. It was possible that it was some straggler seeking shelter from the rain; but it had rained pitilessly all day, and there was little chance of its abatement. I was suspicious; there were valid reasons for a watch being set upon the house, and all that issued thence; it was imperative, in the midst of danger, to be constantly on guard. I passed rapidly by on the other side of the way, and went on for a hundred yards or more, crossing the road suddenly, and turning back again.

I reached my own door, and passed by—the figure was gone, and the deep recess of the doorway was untenanted.

No one had passed me, so the watcher, or loiterer, must have proceeded down the road. I walked rapidly onwards, but overtook no one; at the corner of the first street, I paused—all was deserted there; far ahead of me gleamed the wet deserted pavement; on either side of the way there was not a human being visible.

I was at a loss to account for this, until the natural idea suggested itself that it was a messenger or visitor to the landlady, and that during the time of my passing the house for the first time, and that of my return to it, he or she had been admitted. I was becoming nervous myself, fancying that the world was full of spies, and every little incident had some hidden meaning which threatened shipwreck to my peace of mind. I returned, opened the door by means of the latch-key which had been furnished me—and went upstairs towards the front room.

There was the murmur of voices inside; the voice of Mary, and another voice that was not strange to me, and was not my mother's. I turned the handle of the door, and entered suddenly. A tall woman, thickly shawled and veiled, rose from the chair in which she had been seated, and stood with one large red hand clutching the back, and looking nervously towards me.

“Measter Gear!”

“Janet!”



CHAPTER VI.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

I advanced towards Janet with extended hands. All my doubts of her seemed to vanish away in her presence.

“I am glad that you have come to help us at last, Janet. We have been sorely tried.”

“I ha’e na coom to help ye,” she responded, gloomily, “ony to make sure that the lassie war well, and na gieing wa’ agin.”

“For no other purpose?”

“For nane ither.”

“A strange purpose to come from Nettlewood,” I said, doubtfully.

“Mayhap it be,” was the short reply; “ye who ne’er anderstood

me, may hae sic thochts—I canna help them—they are na beesiness o' mine."

She still clutched tenaciously at the back of the chair, and did not look into my face. Through the thick veil she wore I could see that she was very wan and haggard, like a woman who had been sorely tried by trouble.

"Janet," I said, after a pause, "lately we have heard strange tales of you. In the search that we are still making for my lost sister, your name has crossed us to perplex us more—to confound still further the mystery on which so little light has fallen."

"Ye suspected me."

"Your actions have been unaccountable, and are therefore naturally suspicious."

"So she saes," replied Janet, with an angry gesture of her hand towards my wife; "she—that ye ha' turned agin me at the last: she, that I ha' lo'ed sae weel, and streeven sae hard for. Measter Gear, ye might ha' waited. In gude time, I might ha' coom to ye, jist as now, and ha' told ye a' I kenned, which be na' sae much as ye expect, mayhap. But the time be na' yet, and I am seelent as the grave."

She closed her lips together, and leaned heavily upon the chair back till it cracked again. She was firm and inflexible, troubled though she was.

"Janet," said my wife, advancing to her, and seeking to take her hand, which was instantly hidden beneath her shawl; "in my heart I do not suspect you—in my heart, I love you as faithfully as ever. I have only asked you to help us in our dire distress—for my husband's sake rather than for mine."

"I ha' coom here the nicht to ask ye to wait for the time when I can speak a' the awfu news which chokes my heart oop, and ye wull not wait. Ye turn agin me, I who would ha' deed for ye, ower and ower agin, Mary Gear."

"Janet," I said sternly, "this is no time for waiting. The days are hurrying on, and every moment that keeps us from the truth is death to the honest name my sister has a claim to."

"Ye ha' doon na' gude—ye ha' set spies upon ye by year restlessness—I warn ye even noo to seet doon patient and let things tak their coorse—there's na better wa' left for ye baith, if ye'll tak an auld woman's word for it. Oh! sir, if ye'll ony keep still e'en noo!"

The woman flung up her veil as if for air, and looked earnestly and beseechingly towards me. She had changed so much since we had seen her last, that at her wan face Mary and I both started back. This new manner, this excitement following so closely upon her former stiocism, or obduracy, seemed to betray her more, and show more clearly to me where my suspicions should have been directed long since. We were hurrying on to the truth, and she was shrinking from it—her guilty conscience had brought her from Cumberland to face us.

"Janet, you would deceive us," I said, sternly; "you would throw us off our guard at the eleventh hour, when the chances are in our favour. I will listen to no advice from one who played her part in the past tragedy, and sought to turn us from our search by seeming ignorance."

"What part ha' I played?"

"Janet Muckersie," I said firmly; "on the night that my sister disappeared, you crossed Nettlewood Ferry. You were seen to steal down in the dead of night and make your way across to the other side to intercept—as I fully believe you *did* intercept—my poor sister hurrying away from the danger of which God had warned her."

Janet's right hand joined her left on the chair back, her figure appeared to sway uneasily, and be supported only by the firm clutch she retained there. More and more ghastly that strangely-marked face turned; it became still more a difficulty to breathe.

"Who tald ye this?"

"You were seen to place a pistol by your side—a pistol-shot was fired in the Black Gap at twenty-five minutes past two—you returned back to Nettlewood House by the private boat, by which Ellen had fled at an earlier period, and your master, the prime mover, for whom you have sacrificed all chance of Heaven, began those plans of infamy, by which he vainly sought to throw dust in the world's eyes, and screen himself and you."

"My God! how did ye ken a' this?"

She sank slowly into the chair against which she had supported herself, and with her feverish hands unfastened the strings of her bonnet.

"Gie me some water—I shall dee else!"

There was a caraffe on the supper-table; Mary ran to it, poured out a glass of water, and held it to the lips of the astonished woman. When Janet had drunk some of the water, she appeared to revive somewhat. She pushed a long grey lock of hair that had trailed forward beneath her bonnet again, and gathered her shawl more closely round her form.

"Why did I coom here this nicht again my ain sense that told me it were wrang?" she muttered.

"Janet," whispered my wife, who was still leaning over her, "will you not deny or explain this? Will you not, for the sake of the old times when you were like a mother unto me, and took the place of mother, loving me and guarding me from evil, tell all now? If for the sake of him who stood even nearer to your heart than I, you have been led on, God knows by what specious argument, or by what awful threats, to take poor Ellen's life, will you not confess all the temptations which bewildered you, and the story which has ended for us all so terribly?"

The white lips parted after a struggle to speak.

"Na," was the hollow, almost despairing answer.

"Janet, your old love for me—that past faithfulness which stood

my friend and shielded me from danger—stands now between me and my judgement of you. Neither my husband nor myself talk of vengeance for the crime into which you may have been led, we only ask you for the truth, and if you will trust in our mercy—if you will only trust in me to plead with Canute for you!”

“I ask ye ony to let me gae noo. I canna do or sae anythin’; I’m a woman with my speerit wholly bracken. I ha’ na confeendence in ane sool in the world—the whole world turns agin me in my trouble.”

“Janet, you have said too much,” I exclaimed; “I cannot let you leave us without an explanation. If you be obstinate with me, I must be stern with you. You are the possessor of an awful secret, and I *must* have it!”

“I am in yer power—I ha’ coom o’ my ain free wull to place mysel’ in it, and ye can hauld me in the trap, gin it please ye,” she replied, more sullenly.

There was a painful interim of silence. It was a difficult step how to proceed; there was no ringing the secret from her, when she had vowed herself to silence; had I been disposed to hand her over to the custody of the law, it was difficult to say if my charge against her could have been for an instant entertained.

And amidst all this, was the doubt as to whether she was really guilty; the doubt which, despite that strange bewildered demeanour, would assert itself, and remind me and Mary of many traits of character wholly different from a remorseless and conscienceless woman. And yet, that demeanour might be an evidence of guilt, which might also represent her old desire to stand the friend of Herbert Vaughan, and screen him, at her own, or any cost, from the consequences of his crime.

She dropped down into the chair, on the back of which she had been leaning, and clasped her bony hands together. If I had thundered forth, “Janet Muckersie, I arrest you on the charge of wilful murder!” she could not have more completely given up, or looked more prepared for the worst.

My wife said “Janet” to her, in a low voice again, but she took no heed; her eyes were steadily fixed upon the carpet at her feet, wherein her future destiny might have been written, so intently was her gaze directed to it.

The position was intricate, and hard to fight one’s way through; in the chequered ground before us what was to be the next step? I had spoken firmly; and had determined even on a sternness of procedure, but the way was dark enough, and I had a little hope of influencing Janet. The silence in that room was very painful: the clock on the mantel-piece ticked unnaturally loud; my mother’s footsteps overhead appeared to shake the house.

I looked towards my wife, whose eyes had long been anxiously directed towards me. She motioned me to cross the room to her.

"Canute," she whispered, when I was at her side, "what is to be done with her? She will say nothing—you might kill her, but you could never induce her to divulge a secret which she considered her duty to keep. Canute, for *his* sake, not for her own, she will remain for ever silent."

"I am sorry," I said, firmly, but I must not spare her."

"What will you do?"

"I am undecided yet—all is mystery still beyond the present moment."

"Canute, will you let poor Janet go her way?" she entreated. "In my heart still I do not think her guilty; and she has come of her own free will to see me."

"Or to spy upon us both, and see how near we are drawing to the truth."

"No, no, Canute. You are hard and uncharitable."

"She—ah!"

I wrenched my arm away from the hand that had been lightly laid upon it, and dashed towards Janet. But she had been too quick for me—with one sudden spring she had leaped from the chair to the door, passed through into the passage, and drawn the door after her, retaining her hold upon the handle. The strong grip of the Scotch-woman was too much for me, she held the door to despite my efforts to wrench it open. A moment afterwards the key, which was outside turned in the lock, and we were prisoners in our turn.

"Locked in!" I cried, running towards the window—struggling with the blind and window catch—with everything just then that seemed to get in my way and delay me. I flung up the window, and my wife screamed, and threw her arms around me—the wind and the rain came driving in again; with a crash that echoed through the house, the table lamp was blown over, extinguished and broken.

I looked out as the street-door opened, and Janet came hurrying forth—a figure of guilt, full of fear for the danger into which she had thrust herself. Had my wife's arms not been round me, I should have leaped on to the pavement, so void of reflection had I become.

"Canute—Canute—for my sake!" she entreated.

The streets were deserted—along the long line of pavement on which the rain was rattling fiercely still, there fell not the shadow of one single human being—escape she must.

"Stop that woman!" I shouted forth into the darkness, but no one responded to my call, and Janet swiftly and decisively hurried away, and the instant afterwards was lost to me.

I shouted forth again into the night, and only the echoes lurking amongst the opposite houses answered me. At the same moment my mother unlocked the door, and stood amazed at the darkness and at the rush of air that made towards her.

"Mercy on me!—what's the matter?"

I remembered that she had hopes of Ellen's life still—and that my thoughts had never darkened hers. I closed the window and sat down. I felt that it was hopeless to follow Janet then.

"What's the matter?" repeated my mother.

"Nothing," I answered, "only a bad character forcing her way into the house, and locking us in. She has gone now."

"Ah! there's a good many bad characters about. Let us look round and see there is nothing missing."



CHAPTER VII.

A TELEGRAM.

HURRIED on by one desire to be stirring in my sister's cause; excited by the progress of every hour that brought the trial of her woman's honesty more near to me; conscious that there was little time to spare and much to do, I was stirring early the next morning, despite the fatigue of the preceding day. It was raining more heavily than ever; in the dull leaden sky overhead there was no promise yet of fairer weather. The world of London read that fact in the dull grey clouds above its head, and went its course phlegmatically. There was no lingering in door portals or beneath shop-blinds that day; business people of position rode to their various offices; poorer brethren with much to do walked sturdily on beneath their umbrellas; boys, beggars, and shabby-looking individuals became reckless, and began the day by getting wet through early; the shopkeepers looked disconsolately through their windows—fancy-goods shopkeepers especially.

I was cool and collected at my early breakfast table, at which Mary, ever watchful now, sat facing me. There was a busy day before me; there was much planning and counterplanning to prepare and fight against; in an hour or two at least I should know whether there was a hope of a respite. In the great match between Herbert Vaughan and me, he was master of the game still, and in my heart I had but little hope. It had been a desperate game for months, but he would play it to the end, and care little what he said or did to be the victor in a strife so deadly. There was a fortune to the winner—and if he lost, it might be death to him.

Mary would have accompanied me, had I not begged her to remain at home. I felt still that my interview with her brother would be better without a witness. If that brother stood at bay, he in his bitter malice might strike at her, whose strength lay only in her love for me. Half an hour before I started to the — Hotel to keep my promise of meeting Herbert Vaughan, Mary and I talked long and earnestly of what was best to do and say. After all it was but idle talk, for there was no guessing what turn the interview might take, and no preparing against the wiles of one so specious.

I went away with her whispered adjurations to be calm—her white face watched me down the street, and the door closed at last reluctantly. In that street I met James Baines. Face to face we came, stared at each other, and passed on. That man was on the watch for Wenford, and on Wenford's caution must depend the rest. I could but chance it, and leave it in uncertainty; following James Baines would not avail me now.

The clocks were striking ten as I reached the — Hotel. I ascended the steps, saw the porter of the preceding night, and sent in my card to Mr. Vaughan. After a few moments' interim, a servant appeared to usher me into his presence. I followed him up a flight of stairs to a room on the first-floor. He entered and announced me,

"Mr. Gear."

The servant retired, and closed the door upon us.

In a spacious and elegantly furnished room sat Herbert Vaughan—true to the promise which he had made me yesternight. He had risen later than myself, and was seated at a breakfast-table, on which a mass of silver glittered—the *Times* newspaper had been in his hand a moment since, as he lounged on the couch in his handsome dressing-gown.

A gentleman, cool and self-possessed—betraying no excitement at my appearance there.

He rose as I entered, not so much by way of polite attention to myself, as to touch an ormolu bell-handle at the side of the mantelpiece.

You are punctual to the minute, Mr. Gear," he said, shortly and decisively.

"To the minute, sir," I repeated.

"Clear away these things," he said to the servant who responded to his summons; "and admit no one, on any account whatever, until this gentleman withdraws."

"Very well, sir."

The servant departed with the tray, and Mr. Vaughan, abandoning the couch for a damask-covered chair, took his place by the table, leaning his arms thereon, and folding his two white hands complacently together.

"Take a seat."

I did so, and sat down facing him. His keen eyes watched every movement of my own; though he was not alarmed, he was, at least, not uninterested. He made no pretence of treating lightly the nature of the business that had brought us face to face there.

"Now, then," he said, in a low tone.

"I will be brief, Mr. Vaughan. I believe all that I have to say may be conveyed in a very few words."

He nodded his head; there was no reply required to this.

"I will ask if it be your intention to proceed with this trial?"

"It is."

"At all hazards."

"If there be any—at all hazards."

"I warn you that you have no proofs against that guilt with which you would stain my sister's name."

"I cannot pay any attention to your warnings, sir," he said. "I have no faith in warnings. I map my my own course out, and go on to the end, undismayed by the enemies who start up to assail me."

"We shall contest this trial."

"Very well."

"Mr. Wenford will defend himself as co-respondent."

"What gentleman would not, who hoped to raise a shilling upon his honest name?"

"He is in a condition to prove that he left Nettlewood unaccompanied by your wife."

"So am I," he answered, quietly.

"That he went to New York without her—that the woman with the false name, paid to personate my sister, was your tool and accomplice."

"He will have an opportunity of saying all this before the Judge in Ordinary—why come here to put me on my guard against the machinations to defeat my hopes?"

"I come to warn you that your are proceeding on to your doom."

"Do I ask you to save me?"

"No."

"Have I warned you to beware of plotting against me in this manner? Surely I have," he asked, more energetically.

"You have warned me once before."

"Once again, then—for the last time!"

"Let me continue—I have not finished yet. To the last farthing of my money shall I employ counsel to represent and defend my sister."

"If the law will allow you!—if it is not too late now!"

"I will be heard, sir," I cried fiercely; "in the open court, and before heaven, I will denounce you."

"Well—what next?"

"I will brand you as my sister's murderer," I cried; "I will rend to shreds your flimsy veil to hide the truth, which damns you

through eternity. I will prove that Ellen was murdered in the Black Gap mountains on the morning of the 21st of July, last year."

He laughed, but his eyes were more intently fixed upon me. There might be an advantage over me in his coolness and self-possession, but I was there to denounce him, and my heart would not beat quietly beneath his insults. That man before me was my sister's murderer, and in his presence there was no calmness for me.

"Murdered in the Black Gap Range," I repeated, "by the hand, perhaps, of Janet Muckersie, who crossed the Ferry at your instigation on the night I mentioned. Ellen fled by the Black Gap range from the death she feared at your hands, and was followed and foully slain. I will prove her presence there by a ring that was discovered in the Pass, and which she wore at Mrs. Ray's."

"I prove this too," was his reply; "Ellen Vaughan did leave my house by means of the private boat—did proceed by the Black Gap Pass, as arranged between her and her paramour—was followed by Janet at my own request, but was never overtaken."

"And the pistol-shot?"

"The pistol-shot," he repeated slowly, "I have nothing to do with. I shall not be called upon to explain all the noises that happened on that night of which you speak."

"I saw my scheme to thwart his fading away—there was but one more arrow left in the shaft. I sent it flying blindly on its way towards him and struck him in the quick."

"And your presence in the Black Gap on that night when the glove was lost?"

His fingers clasped together more rigidly, and for an instant the colour left his face. But he kept his eyes upon me still, as though my soul were bare before him, and he could read all that it expressed.

"You are becoming more vague," he said at last, adding, more scornfully, "*my* presence!"

"Herbert Vaughan—I have that glove."

"You may have fifty if you please."

He had recovered his hard defiant manner—he sat there resolved to brave his way through all, and in my sinking heart I felt how powerless I was.

"It might have been better, perhaps, to have proved collusion in this matter," I said; "to have taken at your word all you related to Wenford, and so have dashed your scheme to atoms. But it was more honest to defend her as I will defend her yet, by God's help!"

"Well, I cannot wish you success."

"If my sister live, as you would have me believe, if you know her address, as you would have Wenford believe, give me the proofs and I will take no further steps in the matter. More, I will beg your pardon for all the evil that I have accused you of."

Herbert Vaughan rose to his full height, and pointed one hand

towards me. His eyes were glittering like a serpent's—not brightening with the light of any honest anger.

"Mr. Gear," he said, slowly and calmly, "I have done with you. I defy you—I will even ask you to do your worst against me. My claim to be considered an injured man will be heard in three days time. Appear on that day and tell the judge I am your sister's murderer, and not her scapegoat, if you dare. The world, that is fond of slander, may believe you, perhaps, but the law, which deals with sober facts, will dash down every lie. Mr. Gear, I offered you the hand of friendship, and you turned away—then, sir, you lost your chance for ever."

"Not my chance for ever if God will it," I exclaimed. "I have begun my search, and will track you to the death! I swear it!"

"You will do your worst," he said; "but I am on my guard, and prepared to meet all invidious attacks. You warn me of danger—but I am prepared for it. It steels my nerves and saves my blood from sluggish inactivity. I am proud of my enemy, Mr. Gear."

I could believe that he was the cool, deliberate villain I had ever thought him, to meet his glance then; on his face I could read his whole dark history.

"Mr. Vaughan," I said, struggling to repress that exhibition of passion which had placed me at a disadvantage with him, "I have failed in the object of my coming—I have neither deterred you from following up an awful slander, nor affected you by my consciousness of your life's infamy."

"Mr. Gear—I never set myself up for a hero," he replied; "I am aware of all the exaggerated statements which your wife has made concerning me, all the stories on which I might throw a different light if I were disposed to stand upon defence. But I am disposed for nothing save a termination to this interview."

"I have no wish to prolong it."

"Let us part, then," he said, "each strengthened by the purity of his intentions, and buoyed up by the knowledge that God is with the right."

The man's confidence or audacity dismayed me; his calm assumption of superiority over me and my motives even staggered me, who knew so much in his disfavour. My old impression recurred to me that that man played his part well and naturally, for the reason that he submerged himself in his character, and for the time believed that he *was* the injured being, to whom so many evil motives had been attributed.

We were standing facing each other, when the servant knocked at the door.

"Come in," said Vaughan, who was no longer anxious to be undisturbed.

"A telegram, sir. The man is waiting in the hall for an answer, if you please."

"A telegram," he muttered, taking up the sealed envelope from the salver that was presented to him, and turning it over and over in his hand; "very well—tell the man to wait. Good morning, Mr. Gear."

I made a slight movement of the head towards him, and then went slowly across the room towards the door. I was reluctant to leave him; I felt that I had not done my best for Ellen's sake; that I had exposed my plans too much, and failed in beating down the one great scheme which ended with his marriage to Letty Ray. Even then, in the last moments of that interview, I endeavoured to think of a weak point in the armour which encased him, and make one last attempt to touch him; but I had used every effort, and was baffled. I had only proved that Ellen Vaughan had crossed the Ferry on the night of the 21st of July, and he had acknowledged to its truth, and called it part of Ellen's scheme arranged before her flight. I looked back at him when I was in the doorway; the servant had retired to deliver the message, and the open paper was in Herbert Vaughan's hand. He had changed at last! The iron nerve which had resisted all attack of mine was shattered then; the face was ashen, and the hand which held the missive shook like an aspen leaf. He had been struck by the lightning of some truth, to give way so suddenly and utterly as that.

His eyes wandered to where I was standing watching him.

"I thought you were gone," he said, with a composure that I could see was forced at that time; "what are you waiting for?"

"You have nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing."

So we parted. Before I closed the door upon him, I saw him sink into a chair by the table, spread carefully before him the missive which had daunted him in mid-career, and, holding his head between his hands, prepare to study that new mystery.

CHAPTER VIII.

CALLED BACK.

IN the heavy rain I went back home. The wind of the last two days had dropped, but there was no hope of the rain's cessation with it. The banks of cloud which had been drifted onwards by the south-west wind now hung motionless and dense over the city, and shut out all hope of sunshine. It rained more heavily that day than it had done all the week, and I dashed my way through it carelessly. I had become accustomed to this abnormal state of things, and only fine weather would have surprised me much. It was weather congenial to my present mood; my heart was heavy, there was little lightness on the path ahead of me—the path which Ellen had followed, and which ended at the precipice.

I walked home after my usual fashion, and found Mary awaiting my return, feverish with the suspense which had kept her excited and restless during my absence.

"What hope?" she asked.

"None," was my hollow answer.

We sat down side by side to speak of the interview and the remarks by which it had been characterized. Further action on my side was imperative now; the case at the Divorce Court must be defended, Wenford must be consulted, and forced onward in the cause.

"You will leave the rest to me, Mary," I said; "I am calm and self-restrained, and the way is clear before me. I cannot ask you to be active in a cause that, if successful will be the ruin of your brother—you will leave the rest in my hands."

"I am thinking of Ellen now," she said boldly; "my sister by marriage—a woman whom he has cruelly oppressed. I will think of him," she added, "when his trouble has come, and he is sorry for all the evil he has caused. Then, Canute," looking timidly into my face, "I will ask you to be merciful to him for your wife's sake."

At this moment the maid-servant entered the room with a letter—a *telegram*!

"Is the man waiting?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

I tore open the envelope, and my wife hung upon my arm ready to read the first words of the message with me. I felt that there was news of moment beneath my hand—news that would affect all

my after-life. The same news which had struck at Herbert Vaughan had come to me.

"Courage, Mary," I said, with a faint smile; "for the worst."

"Or the best, Canute."

I opened the telegraphic missive, which was dated Bowness, and read—

"From Joseph Gear, of Nettlewood Inn, Cumberland, to Canute Gear, of Penton Terrace, New Road, London.

"Come to Nettlewood House at once, by the express, which leaves Euston Square at one p.m. Janet Muckersie will tell all—*must* tell all. Vaughan is on his way also. I am waiting here at Bowness for an answer from you. I shall expect you at the Ferry Inn to-night. Bring Mary."

"What does it mean?" my wife exclaimed.

"It means that we are close upon the truth, and must go at once."

"Or is it a snare of some one's to take us away from London at this time?"

"I must chance it—I feel that we are nearing the end, Mary."

I sat down to my desk to think of a message to be sent by telegraph to Bowness.

The message perplexed me; after all, it might be a deeply-laid scheme to lure me from London—something on a par with the duplicity that had so long deceived me. What was to hinder a stranger from walking into the telegraph office at Bowness, and forwarding me a missive in my brother's name? What if Janet had departed by a late train last night, reached Bowness, and telegraphed that message to me?—what if Vaughan had been acting to the last? I had fought so long against the elements of surprise, that in everything around me a hidden motive seemed to lurk, and was to be prepared against. How was it possible to elicit the genuineness of this message? An idea seized me at last. I wrote off the following reply—

"I will come down at once. If you are Joseph Gear, telegraph back immediately to my wife what you found in the Black Gap Pass on the morning of the 22nd of July. She waits your answer."

"I will start at once," I said to Mary, "but the answer will not reach you by the time to accompany me. If Joseph telegraphs back 'a ring,' come on by the next train, and I will await you at Kendal; if there be no reply within three hours, telegraph to Crewe to me that no answer has been sent. I shall be at Crewe at seven or eight this evening, and will proceed at once to the telegraph office for the message."

I sent off my reply, and then hastened forward my preparations for departure. I had but little time before me to reach Euston

Square—every minute was precious—the fever of excitement was once more upon me, and hurled me forward. There seemed no hope of rest again.

My arrangements for departure were hurriedly made, my wife assisting me, and glancing nervously towards me.

When I was prepared to depart, and had once again run over my instructions to her—what train she was to take with my mother and child, what course to adopt, if all were part of a scheme to entrap her—she passed her arms round my neck, and held me to her.

“Oh, Canute!—for my sake, more than ever, you will take care!”

“Trust me.”

“If good or evil follow this, I shall still fear the result to you.”

“I shall not give way yet a while, Mary—I feel stronger than ever to meet all that may be in store for us at Nettlewood.”

A few more last injunctions—a promise from her to leave for Kendal immediately on receipt of a telegram from Joseph Gear—a last embrace—and then I was whirled away in a Hansom-cab to Euston Square. There was little time to spare—only by three minutes did I save the express bound for the north of England.

Half the carriages were already occupied by passengers, who had arrived in better time than myself—late comers were hurrying to and fro in wild bewilderment of purpose—the guards were ready, the engine-drivers were at their posts, the station-master was anxious to be rid of the train.

A miserable day for a long railway-journey; the open road beyond the terminus, misty and grey with the rain still falling—heavily falling from heaven to earth.

I travelled first-class that day—it had not struck me that I had given up my old habit of economy, until the door of the railway-carriage was banged and locked upon me.

There were three occupants of the compartment beside myself—all business men, travelling northwards, with the hope of making money in some way or other, I could see it written on their faces. Stolid and reserved men, whose company suited me just then—who did not want to engage anyone in conversation, but preferred to cross their arms upon their chests, and frown themselves to sleep.

I took my place, and dropped into thought at once; ere the shrill whistle sounded, and the train glided away from the terminus into the density that lay before it, I was thinking of all that lured me from London to the old battle-ground—of all in the past that had gathered round my path, rendered every step doubtful, distracted me, weighed upon my brain, until my confidence in keeping strong began to lessen with my failing strength. I should be ill—I felt that I should be dangerously ill—if the last step led me to another road, on which no light could fall—I felt that there would be a morbid happiness in standing at Ellen's grave, and saying,

"The search is over—here she was hidden by the guilty hands that snatched her life away!"

A long wearisome journey, despite the rapid progress of the train, the flashing by of station after station, the dashing along embankments, through cuttings and tunnels, the difficulty of catching a glimpse of the landscape through the rain-dotted glass. My heart beat, and my temples throbbed unmercifully. I had accustomed myself lately to long walks, in all weathers, at all times, and this sitting quietly in a corner of the railway-carriage strangely irritated me.

We had rattled onwards about an hour, when one of the business-men, awakened by a more unearthly whistle of the engine than usual, sat blinking at me for a while.

"They're skimming on, well, now," he said after a half-grunt by way of preface.

"Do you think so?"

"Don't you?"

"I fancy not—I can't say," was my vague answer.

The business-man blinked at me again, rubbed at the misty glass, with the palm of a great red hand, then said,

"What a lot of rain we've had lately!"

"Yes."

"All over the country—my correspondents assure me there is not a town or city in England that has escaped this horrible deluge. Very bad for the farmers, I should say."

"Doubtless, very bad."

"Some of the valleys in Cumberland are flooded, I am told."

"Indeed!"

I looked up with greater interest.

"What do they say about Nettlewood?" I asked.

"Where's that?"

"Beyond the Black Gap range, and near Henlock."

"Don't know anything about that place," he replied; "one of the fancy places for tourists to skulk in, I suppose. Offers a waterfall, or a mountain, or a chance of breaking one's neck? A favourite place of yours, perhaps, sir?"

I shuddered.

"No."

The man curled himself askew, blinked at me once or twice again, and went off to sleep a second time, to wake no more till the train reached Rugby. It was like a reprieve to dash out of the carriage, and pace the platform like a madman until the few minutes' grace was up, and the train was ready to depart. I lingered till the last moment, and then stepped into the first carriage that was handy to me—without any regard for my old position. I entered a first-class compartment, tenanted but by two persons, both females; here I could remain without a chance of being disturbed by intrusion on my thoughts.

And here my thoughts were intruded upon at the first moment. The lady facing me leaned forward to make sure of the recognition, and then said,

"Mr. Gear—you here?"

"Miss Ray."

"You are going to Nettlewood—you have been sent for suddenly?"

"Yes."

"What does it all mean?" she asked, in almost a beseeching tone; "you who were never an enemy of mine, and were kind to me before I dreamed of riches, and was but a poor waitress at an Inn—you will tell me what it means?"

"Miss Ray, I am in the dark concerning all that may happen in the future. What does Mr. Vaughan say?"

"I have not seen him. I called at his hotel an hour since, and heard that he had started for Cumberland in haste."

"This is no jugglery, then—no plot of Vaughan's."

"It is a mystery," she murmured.

She flung her veil back as if for air. Her companion leaned forward, and asked a question eagerly.

"No," she replied; "I want nothing but peace of mind."

"But you will be calm, Miss Ray—after all, there may be no occasion for alarm."

"There is danger threatening the only one I love in the world," she cried.

"Hush—hush!"

"He knows it," pointing to me; "why should I seek to hide my love for one who will shortly be my husband? Mr. Gear knows all, Miss Carpenter."

"Yes—but——"

"And Mr. Gear will at least tell me, by our past friendship together, what is taking him to Nettlewood so suddenly?"

"Candidly, I have been telegraphed for by my brother."

"Is he ill?"

"No—but he has been in search for a long while of a truth that has been hidden from me—and I think that he is nearing it."

"This concerns Herbert?"

"I believe so."

"*He* will strive to affect his honour—to prove him a bad man."

"I am ignorant of all that is waiting for me at my journey's end" I answered.

It was an evasive reply, and she looked eagerly towards me; her face was livid and angular—there was less panic than suspense in her dark eyes—less fear for her future than for the uncertainty of the form it might assume.

"Mr. Gear, I do not think that you are in the plot against my happiness," she said, after awhile; "from all that I have known of you, I cannot believe that."

"Miss Ray," I replied, "if any plotting of mine could throw a light upon the mystery of my sister's death, I should have attempted it long since, though your seeming happiness had been blasted by the discovery."

"Why do you call it seeming happiness?"

"We have spoken of this before—surely, at this late hour, I need not give you my opinion of Herbert Vaughan's character."

"Were he a villain, I should be happy with him—my life is bound up with his, for good or evil, now. In all his trouble I stand by him—whatever happens in the future, I will not desert him!"

I could not reason with this excited woman, whose love was a disease—a madness. In her poverty she had brooded upon it till her mind had almost given way: now in her riches she was the same demented girl, who would see no danger on the road Vaughan thought of leading her.

"Miss Ray—pardon me, but I have sympathy with you. If Herbert Vaughan remains a prosperous man, then I am for ever unhappy—if he marry you, I and those I love are for ever disgraced."

"I know it—I know it," she murmured.

She was silent for awhile; she lay back and closed her eyes—by the light in the carriage-roof above our heads, I thought that she was sleeping. Her companion looked across at me.

"If she were to sleep a little while, it would do her so much good," she said; "a little thing disturbs her now."

"I am not asleep," said Letty, passing one hand across her forehead, "only my head aches, and my brain is on fire. If I only knew the worst, I would face it, and not step back a hair's breadth."

Another long pause, broken by her impatient snatch at the tassel of a travelling bag her companion carried.

"Where did I put the letter, Miss Carpenter?—the message that was sent to me?"

"In the bosom of your dress, Miss."

"Ah! I had forgotten."

From her dress she drew forth a paper and thrust it into my hands.

"Try and explain that to me—whatever it means."

I opened the paper. It was a telegraphic message, and ran thus:

"From Janet Muckersie, Nettlewood House, Nettlewood, Cumberland, to Miss L. Ray, of Russell Square, London. Herbert Vaughan will be at Nettlewood House to-night. The Divorce Case is abandoned for ever. If you wish to hear the truth, keep strong and come home."

"Abandoned for ever!—thank God!" I ejaculated.

"Thank God for my heart's bitterness—my shame," she said.

"No, for my sister's fair name, which Herbert Vaughan had the power to hold up to virtuous woman's scorn. The power but not the right!"

"She *was* false to him, Mr. Gear."

"Miss Ray," I replied firmly, "I will not pain you by my old assertions—if we are called to hear the truth, we may afford to be patient until then. But I—I would warn you to be prepared for a great shock."

"I am prepared now—I shall be calm soon. After all, what *is* the worst?"

"God knows."

"It can't dash down my faith in him—it can't rob me of his love for me—through sin and shame I follow him to the end. If he dies, I will die with him."

"Miss Ray—Miss Ray!" pleaded her companion.

"I am quiet now—see how steady my hand is!"

After holding forth her hand, on the left finger of which glittered one single diamond that shone like a fire-speck in the light of the oil-lamp, she wrapped herself in her shawl, and remained silent and moody. She closed her eyes again, but they were restless eyes beneath the heavily-fringed lids, and I caught them fixed upon me brightly and steadily, at uncertain intervals. I felt that there were flashes of suspicion which crossed her mind at times, and that she could not shake off the impression that I was connected with the awful truth with which they threatened her. The avowal—often declared—of my want of faith in Vaughan, connected me with the danger which she feared was hanging over him. And yet, strangely enough, her confidence revived at times; I could tell that by her varied mood.

We reached Stafford, where the rain seemed pelting down more violently than ever—it was like the roar of a sea as it fell upon the roof of the station.

"Can I get you any refreshment, Miss Ray?"

"No."

"You look fatigued."

"I am well enough—pray let me be."

Her natural kindness led her to think an instant afterwards of her companion, but Miss Carpenter also refused any refreshment, at this stage of the journey. I left the carriage and walked up and down the platform in the same excited fashion; I sought no refreshment myself, my heart was sick with suspense. I returned to the same compartment—there was some satisfaction in accompanying Letty Ray, and watching one who suffered like myself. It was strange that we two should be travelling express to the old scene, where both our wild romance began, and that her feverish excitement should be like my own, for a reason that was so utterly apart from all my hopes and fears.

The train whirled away; the darkness of the night settled down upon us, and the rain, "scurrying" across the open country, dashed against the carriages like a heavy sea that broke into spray against the obstacle opposing it.

It was five o'clock when the train clanked its way beneath the great terminus at Crewe. I leaped from the carriage, unmindful of my companions, and rushed at the first guard.

"The telegraph office—quick!" I shouted at him.

"This way, sir."

A civil young fellow, who read the excitement on my face, and felt for it, led the way to the telegraph office, and, waiting not for a fee, dashed back to the duties which the arrival of the express from London had incurred upon him. I entered the office.

"Is there a message left here for Mr. Canute Gear?"

"Yes."

The clerk passed a paper over to me, which I eagerly read.

"The message was from your brother. I follow by the next train."

"When is the next train from London to Kendal?"

"You had better ask the guard. I don't know much about the trains, sir."

But the guards were slamming doors and twisting handles. I dashed at the book-stall, flung down a piece of money for a Bradshaw—to this day I am ignorant of the amount I paid for that wonderful statistical compilation—rushed to the carriage where I had left Miss Ray last. She and her companion were in their old positions; another traveller had taken up his seat in the corner—another man whom business further north had led to defy the inclemency of the weather.

I set myself to study Bradshaw by the little light afforded by the carriage lamp—to my horror I found that no further train left London for the north that day. The next train stopped at Lancaster, but on referring to other pages I discovered that a train left at three in the morning, reaching Penrith at twenty minutes to five. Would she be informed of this at the station, or discover it by time-tables for herself?—would she come on to Lancaster?

"What disturbs you so much, Mr. Gear?" Letty asked after a while.

There was no occasion to make my motives a secret, and I told her at once.

"My wife promised to follow by the next train, but the only train bound northwards to-night stops at Lancaster—reaching there at midnight."

"Well?"

"And I am uncertain whether she will come by that train, or wait till the next day."

"She must be strangely altered since my past knowledge of her, if she can remain passive till the morning."

"You are right—I will wait for her at Lancaster."

"You love your wife very dearly, Mr. Gear?"

"God bless her!—yes."

"I never thought that you would be happy with her—but I was

deceived. Why should *you* not be deceived in judging where my best happiness awaits me?"

Though it was a question, it was directed more to herself than me. She did not anticipate an answer, but folded herself more tightly in her shawl, and closed her eyes again. She dropped into a half-sleep, half-waking stupor, and soon afterwards started up in her seat with a suppressed cry.

"What a dream!—what a strange dream!"

I did not reply to this, and she leaned across and said, in as low a tone as the clatter of the train would permit.

"I thought I was at the lake again, and you had your arms round me drawing me from the water. Oh, sir!—was it for the best?"

"Surely, Letty, for the best."

"You prophesied about the brightness of my future, then. This is the future you were thinking of at that time!"

"No, Letty—further away still—further away."

"If all that you believe could become my belief too, I could curse you for that rescue now."

She lay back, and held up her hand, when I would have replied to her.

She closed her eyes, and once I heard her moan forth,

"Oh! this dreadful never-ending journey!"

The time dragged on, despite the rain and rush of the train; hour after hour shut in by the same thoughts of danger and uncertainty—conscious of being borne towards the truth—whatever it might mean, or whose whole after-lives it might affect. Throughout the long journey Letty refused all refreshment, and her companion thought her example worthy of imitation, although she made a few furtive nibbles at some biscuits stored at the bottom of her travelling-bag.

Close upon nine o'clock, when the train reached Lancaster at last—Lancaster, where the everlasting rain had followed us.

"You stay here?" Letty asked.

"Yes—I am compelled."

"I shall be at Nettlewood by daybreak—I post all night."

"I shall follow you as soon as possible."

"I will warn him that you are on your way towards him, sir," she said, with her old suspicion. "If you bring evil with you, he must guard against it."

"Tell him I am coming, if you will," I answered. "My arrival is no secret."

I had stepped from the carriage; she had lowered the window, and sat there looking out, with the rain beating against her face. I bade her good night, but she motioned me to stay an instant. In that last moment there came upon her an awful fear of danger to her lover—perhaps of his unworthiness, despite her woman's faith, which clung to him through all!

"Mr. Gear," she whispered suddenly, "if the power be in your hands at the last, you will be merciful?"

"Miss Ray—I will be just."

"But if——" her face flushed, she turned away to draw up the window with an impatient clang, and shut me and her passing fear away from her. The shrill whistle rang into the night again—the train moved on, and left me standing there, with a few passengers damp and shivering like myself.

"Guard, how much more rain are we going to have?" asked a facetious traveller of the man who stood under the lamps examining the tickets.

"Not much more, I hope, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Much damage done about here?"

"Heaps, sir."

"Ah! we haven't seen the end of it yet. Good night."

"Good night to you, sir."



CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST STAGE.

WEARISOME yet feverish hours of expectancy between the departure of the last train and the arrival of the next, in which I hoped to find my wife. The station after a while deserted; the little waiting-room with the fire left to burn out, and the coal-scuttle removed for fear of depredations on my part; some one behind the partition where the tickets were given out occupied for a while in counting money, and scratching with a very bad pen; finally relapsing into slumber and snoring in a disjointed manner, that told of troubled dreams.

I walked up and down the deserted waiting-room, too restless to attempt to sleep; too anxious to leave the station and make a dash through the rain for an hotel; too excited to sit still and take my strange position quietly. Occasionally, when the scene became too wearisome, and the ticking of the clock too unbearable, I made a dash for the platform, and took a survey of the long sweep of iron road, the dark landscape around it, the dots of light from the signa-

lamps, the signal house, where a cheerful fire was burning, and where the figure of a man passed before the brightness now and then. Occasionally some little signs of activity woke up the place for a while; a luggage train heavily laden would rush by; a guard would emerge from some mysterious quarter, and look sleepily after it; the colours of the signal lights would change perhaps; the train would recede; the red lamps behind the last truck fade away into the darkness; the guard disappear; the signal lights be once more expressive of a clear field ahead and no danger; and then the noisy rattle of the never-ending rain.

I felt no bodily fatigue—I was only heart sick with impatience to be once more moving onwards. Sometimes I accused myself of want of interest in Ellen's fate, in the retribution which was coming to him who had so ruthlessly scathed my sister's happiness, that led me to halt midway upon my journey, and await Mary's arrival. In the hours I lost by this inaction, what might not be lost in the distant country whither Vaughan and Letty Ray had sped? Then I thought of my delicate sensitive wife reaching Lancaster in the dead of night without a friend to assist her, reaching there in the hope of finding me, and meeting but strangers' faces glowering at her loneliness.

At half-past eleven o'clock, signs of life at Lancaster became apparent once more; two guards made their reappearance; the snoring behind the ticket partition ceased; some one in the distance ran backwards and forwards in the rain, swinging a lantern to and fro, and representing business at least. Twelve o'clock struck, and no signs of the train; the guards, perfectly unconcerned about the delay, and inclined to smile at my questions respecting its non arrival, one of them sitting on the edge of a barrow and counting some loose coppers which he had drawn from his trousers' pocket. Finally, to my relief the whistle was heard ringing out in the distance, then the fiery eyes of the engine looming forth and coming nearer and nearer to the station. The train at its journey's end at last, and the travellers leaping from the train to the platform, and staring around them in rather a scared manner, after the fashion of travellers in general. Last and best of all—my wife, looking from the window of a first-class carriage, in search of the one friendly face for which she had sacrificed so much.

“Mary!”

“Canute!” she cried, “oh! I am very glad that you are here!—although I scarcely expected—scarcely hoped—to see you. I thought you would have proceeded to Penrith by the train, and left your mother, baby and me to follow you.”

“No, together in this—however it may end.”

I assisted my wife and mother to alight—my mother, who held her grand-daughter in her arms, and would not part with her on any account. Outside the station a fly was waiting, in the hope of a

chance customer. This I secured, and placed them within, returning once more to the office to rap at the partition behind which the clerk was still ensconced. The ticket-hole was opened, and the sleepy eyes of a clerk regarded me.

"What do you want?"

"Is there a possibility of telegraphing to Penrith to-night?"

"Not the slightest—the telegraph clerk has left."

"Can he be found?"

"If he could, we couldn't find the clerk at Penrith; the office is closed and locked there by this time."

"Thank you."

Resigning this attempt, I returned to the fly, and was giving the man orders to drive to the nearest hotel, when a railway guard touched me on the shoulder.

"Beg pardon, sir, but do you wish any message to be left at Penrith?"

"Yes—how can it be done?"

"There's a luggage train will stop just by at half-past one—it's going on to Penrith—I daresay Bill won't mind leaving any message for you at the station, sir."

"I want a post-chaise to meet the train that reaches Penrith at twenty minutes to five. At any expense—if it can only be ready for me."

"Post-chaise!—where to, sir?"

"Nettlewood."

"Through Keswick and Borrowdale?"

"Yes—that route."

"Bill can find some one to see after it. Bill's going on to Edinbro' himself."

"Well, I will leave it to you and Bill. Share this with him."

I placed a half-sovereign in the man's hand, together with my card, to be left at Penrith, and then entered the fly.

"Have you both courage and strength to start again in three hours?" I asked of my wife and mother.

"To start anywhere with you," answered Mary. I have long since forgotten my old sensitiveness to cold—or rather that old sensitiveness which my brother persuaded me into."

"Ah! he was plotting then against my happiness—he did not wish that we should meet too often," I murmured.

"Still he did not thwart *that* happiness, at least," said Mary. "Oh! Canute," in a lower tone, inaudible to my mother, "you will be merciful to him—my only brother—if the power be left in your hands?"

"When we know all, and I possess that power, I will think of you, Mary."

"You are more than generous."

I made an effort to turn the subject, and with some difficulty suc-

ceeded. Until the power was in my hands to check his present villainy, it was but idle talking. Generous or just, it was never my intention to leave that man wholly free to work his schemes elsewhere; had he been my own brother, in lieu of Mary's, I should have exacted some stern reparation. And what reparation was sufficient for all that he had plotted against our lasting peace?

At an hotel, where I made some little attempt to eat and drink, with but small success—where Mary came to my side again, and bade me keep strong and hopeful yet."

"Hopeful!" I exclaimed.

"Hopeful of the better days in store for us, when those shadows belong to the past—when we have shown to Herbert, to Janet, that we are not merciless avengers."

"Do not plead for them again. If it be possible, let us forget them for awhile."

The hours were long before it was time to return to the station; until all was ended for good or evil, I knew now there was no peace for me. I could not take peace to my side, and wait patiently the coming of events—even my wife's presence was but little comfort, I thought, now the anxiety concerning it had abated. Was it possible that I should ever know peace of mind again? When the grim end came, and I was face to face with it, would not the result for ever keep me aloof from the happiness that I had known once?

My mother spoke little during the whole journey; it was all very unreal and dream-like to her. No one had offered her an explanation; and she had not asked for one. She knew that Ellen's name, and that our interest in Ellen was taking us back to Nettlewood, and she had been advised by Mary not to harass me with questions which it would be impossible to answer yet awhile.

If the truth were coming towards us, the time for explanation would be soon enough for this poor mother, who believed not in Ellen's death.

We started for the station at ten minutes to three—at three o'clock, we were once more waiting in the rain for the arrival of the down train. At a few minutes past three, we were once more whirling onwards—following in the track of her who had vowed to love him to the last. On through the darkness, at a swift rate along the iron road—thank Heaven, once more in action! One stoppage at Kendal, and then dashing forward fiercely, at a rate that stirred my blood at last—fiercely and madly to the end in view, through the darkness of the night, to the light wherein all mystery was to die!

We reached Penrith at twenty-five minutes to five—five minutes before time. Of a guard, who was waiting on the platform, I asked if a post-chaise had been procured for Mr. Gear and family.

"Yes, sir; the waiter of the hotel did not like to chance it at first, but remembered you as Mr. Sanderson's partner, and it's been waiting these five minutes."

"Thank God!"

We passed from the platform, through the station, to the post-chaise.

"How long a time to reach Nettlewood?"

"Four hours and a half, or five hours, if we're not kept long at the posting-houses, sir."

"That will be ten o'clock when we reach Nettlewood."

"Thereabouts, sir."

"A sovereign a piece extra if we are there before ten."

"We'll do it, sir."

We were dashing by the main road to Keswick a few minutes afterwards; in a little while it would be like home again amongst the hills—had the sun risen, and the rain and mist been less heavy in these regions, the sight of the mountains in the background would have soon reminded us of the cottage at Borrowdale, where, at least, were only fair reminiscences.

"When shall we settle down again peacefully, Canute?" asked my wife, clasping her hands upon my arm, as she sat by my side.

"Presently—presently!"

"You will not give way?—you have promised me!"

"Strong to the end—if, when the end comes, I am a little weary, I shall have a faithful nurse."

"Canute," she said fearfully, "you feel ill? The excitement has been too much for you."

"I hope not. I am a little fatigued with the long journey—presently—presently, Mary, we shall all be well and happy again. What is to-morrow?"

"The eighteenth of November."

"Two days before the divorce case. If Vaughan should not be at Nettlewood, after all!—should be now hurrying back to strike his last blow!"

"Patience, Canute—you that have been ever patient. Mr. Wenford remains in London to defend his case."

"Ah! I had forgotten him—we may rely upon him?"

"Yes; I have seen him—he knows now how much he has been deceived."

"He will——"

A soft white hand was pressed upon my lips.

"Try and sleep—pray, do not speak any more of this just now."

I was silent; I lay back and closed my eyes to set her mind at rest, but I might as easily have flown to Nettlewood as slept at that time.

We clattered along the road; the morning was as dark and dense as the night; no sign of daybreak was yet visible; nothing was stirring on the way; the silence of death would have dwelt upon that desolate track, had not the echoes been aroused by our hurried progress through the country, and the hiss, hiss! of the steadily

descending rain. Daybreak at last, and the faint gleam of dawn lighting up our pale faces in the carriage.

"You have been sleeping, dear!" said my wife with some exultation.

"It will do me good," I replied, evasively.

"Are we nearing Keswick?"

"Not yet, I think—but the mists are very heavy here."

"We are nearing the mountain land," said my wife. "If the sky were clear we should see dear old Skiddaw once more."

"You speak of the mountains now, as though you loved them, Mary?"

"I have been unhappy in London—in London your strength has been failing—you were brighter, happier here."

"Dear old Skiddaw, then—under its shadow we spent our quiet honeymoon."

"And little Ellen was born in our mountain home—the Ellen that has come, like a blessing, to replace the old."

"Ah! if the old Ellen had died quietly in her youth and beauty—died even of a broken heart—I might have thought so."

The day became lighter—the landscape took its colours from the daybreak—through the rain we could see the fields and hedgerows of the valley, and the base of the mountains whose tops were hidden in the mist. After a while we were dashing into Keswick, and those townsfolk who had risen betimes, stood about the paved street watching the cortège.

A change of post-horses was procured here; those of the neighbours who recognized me, came forward to welcome me home, and kindly undertook a message for Mr. Sanderson, who would be stirring in the town presently; an early breakfast, or rather the ceremony of one, was gone through whilst the horses were being changed, and then we were off again, dashing away from the fair Lake of Derwentwater, and the broad road that left Borrowdale and home behind us, through Portinscale and Braithwaite, keeping on our left, in the distance, the great mountain range, across which cut the Black Gap Pass, steeped in impenetrable cloud that morning. Hour after hour passing by, the horses changed once more, the last stage of the journey began, coming near well-known scenes, approaching, at last to Henlock, over Henlock Bridge, and then madly, furiously, to keep up a character for speed, and earn the sovereigns handsomely, dashing down the Vale to Nettlewood.

"Half-past nine, sir!" cried the nearest post-boy, as I looked out of the carriage-window.

"Well done!"

"There's the Ferry, sir—and here's some one running towards us, I think."

It was Joseph, who at a rate of progression very remarkable for him, came towards the post-chaise.

"Stop!"

The carriage stopped when we were facing Joseph. He opened the door, and clambered into the post-chaise.

"Don't go to the Ferry Inn," he gasped; "that would lose time, and we're wanted further on."

"At Nettlewood House?"

"No—at Miss Ray's. To face Vaughan at last with all the proofs we have gathered together."

"He is there, then?"

"Yes; and anxious to hear the worst. If he tried to escape, it would be of no avail—I think he only hopes for mercy now. Miss Ray is very anxious to see you. Well, mother?"

"Well, my dear son—what—what of Ellen?"

"You will know all directly. I have promised to say nothing. Canute," he said, suddenly leaning forward, "you owe me eight and sixpence for that last telegram to Mrs. Gear—it's of no consequence just now, but of course it was at your own expense."



CHAPTER X.

IN THE NET.

THE post-chaise drove us direct to Miss Ray's mansion—the house which I had first planned in the matter-of-fact life preceding this—which had caused all the varied changes that had come upon us all. Had the advertisement in the *Builder* newspaper never crossed me, or I had failed to be successful, what a different end to this story! When I crossed the Ferry at Nettlewood, if I had dreamed of all the changes that my presence would effect and of all the crime which evolved therefrom, I should have turned back on my way, and have never met with Mary Zitman.

And yet, that one step backward would have been shutting from light and life the wife who had found happiness with me—dooming her ever to solitude and want of sympathy. Her happiness and mine for ever lost—but Ellen by my side, knowing not the dangers to which she had approached so closely. All so different even—the lady of the mansion to which we were approaching, still the dark-browed and sullen maiden of the Ferry Inn, surely a better life for her, a fairer than the future one in store. I had attained happiness by the step that brought me to Cumberland—happi-

ness so far as it related to my own home and household gods—but I had brought danger and death to others, and evil had followed like a shadow on my track. Yes, better to have turned back, I thought, and known nothing of the troubled hearts that beat in that green vale!

The post-chaise dismissed—the heavy demand upon my purse met—we went along the carriage drive together.

On the threshold of Miss Ray's house, a woman without a bonnet, but thickly hooded, met us.

"I ha' been waitin' for ye all."

"Janet!" I exclaimed.

"Ay, Janet!" she replied, "ye need na' luke sae scared. I hae been waitin' this day, which she would ha' forestalled, the day o' my shame and her humiliation."

"Will there be no more mystery?—no more to perplex us after this, Janet?" my wife asked.

"Na mair—a' noon-dayglare, cruel and sarchin' eno' to maist o' us."

She turned to my mother and touched her shawl.

"Ye are auld, and a shock such as be coomin'—a story sic as I hae to tell, is na gude for ye. Will ye tak the bairn upstairs to a room which the servant will shew ye, and let yer son tell the story afterwards? It will be sae muckle the better for ye, ma'am."

"Canute?"

My mother turned to me as if for advice.

"So much the better, mother," I repeated.

"Well—I will go, then."

Janet turned to the maid-servant, and whispered a few words in her ear; the servant nodded, and then asked my mother to follow her.

"The rest can follow me. Ye can stap awa' if ye like," turning on Joseph somewhat suddenly.

"Thank you, but I prefer to accompany the rest."

"Wull, ye hae a right, mayhap, do as ye list."

Janet led the way along the hall, more like the mistress of the house than the servant—at the library door she paused, holding the handle very firmly for awhile.

"I'm na sae strang as I used to be, and this be a sair trial to a woman who ha' leaved sae lang in hope o' *him*."

The shawl dropped from her head, and her dishevelled grey hair fell about her face. She pushed the hair back behind her ears, and looked a little wildly at us.

"We ha' roon doon—ye need na be too hard, now your day's coom to triumph."

"A sad triumph, Janet," I remarked.

"Ay, who kens that sae weel as I?"

She turned the handle of the door, and entered, saying,

"They've coom!"

We followed, and a man at the end of the table, who had been seated there with a book before him, looked up at us in a strangely

nervous manner—a manner very strange for him—and then looked down again. It was Herbert Vaughan, the man who by some chance, to me wild and inexplicable, was brought to bay at last!

I looked round for Miss Ray, but she was not present yet.

"Miss Ray will na be here a weel," said Janet, calmly.

"Why not?" was Vaughan's answer.

She ha' not the strength—all this ha' been a shock to her."

"Well—well!"

Vaughan idled with the leaves of the book he had feigned to be interested in; then he looked up again with that strange anxiety or nervous suspense which I had before remarked.

"I am in your hands, sirs," he said, addressing my brother and myself; "I am here at your bidding. You have tracked me to the death, but you have promised to be merciful. Let us arrange all together quietly, and spare the world a confession that can do no good. What is required of me?—and who is my accuser?"

There was a long pause; I looked towards my brother, but he sat very still, with his thin hands clasped together.

"You must remember that I am strangely in the dark as yet," he said; "that a message from my housekeeper, Janet, has brought me hither to meet you. She tells me that everything is known by you, and that my safety only lies in coming here. That away is danger, but here may be forgiveness. I am prepared for the worst. Who flings the first stone at me?"

He looked up with a glance of his old defiance; then his features changed, and his face assumed a deadly whiteness, as Janet suddenly rose and stood at the end of the table facing him.

"I do!" she answered.

"You—you?"

He clutched the table with both hands, and glared at Janet as though at a spirit. Whatever he believed was known, whatever calamity he had prepared for, he did not think of this faithful servant of his house becoming his accuser. It was the first blow aimed at him, and it told. It brought twenty years more to his looks on the instant.

"I see all now!" he gasped.

"I am yer accuser, Herbert Vaughan," she said; "God kens how I uckle raither I would ha' laid doon and deed than seen this awfu' day. I saw it coomin' lang since. I kenned that it wad happen at this time—it war a' thocht o' afore yer cunnin'," turning to my brother, "caught at part o' the truth, and would ha' branged aboot my ruin."

"I beg your pardon, Janet," said Joseph, humbly.

"Not ye, or the likes o' ye, that mak me turn agin him at the last," said Janet; "but himsel'—his ain sel' that tuke no warnin', but went on, on in his cruelty, until he faced the truth. Oh! maester," turning to him with a touching earnestness, "if ye had ony

been sorry for a' the evil ye ha' been the cause on, if ye had ony gi'en ane sign that ye war na a' eevil, I wad hae been wi' ye in this trial noo."

"Traitor!" he muttered.

"Na that," cried Janet, firing at the word, and drawing herself up proudly; "na that, e'en noo. Had I been a traitress, ye might ha' deed years ago upo' a gallows; but I held my peace, and watched ower ye, and did my best to sav' yer wilfu' sool. Ye war greedy for goold, and luv'd it beyon' human life—and when I dooted ye first, wi' *her* first husband," pointing to my wife, "I kep' my watch upo' ye for your ain sak'. They war ony doots, and I would na ha' them certainties, or try to mak them sae. But when it cam to choose atween the auld nurse's luv for ye, and for yer sister Mary—when ye turned agin her, and sought to stap her happiness in ilka wa', I gav ye up at ance. I luv'd her best o' a', and I *did* strive for her happiness at least."

"My dear Janet!" cried Mary.

"Bide awa' we are na' gettin' to the end yet awheel. When I chose atween him and ye on ye're bridal day, Mary Gear, it war na that I luv'd him maist, but that I kenn'd I could serve ye and yeers muckle better by my stay here. I believed e'en then that I saw danger to his puir young wife, and I stay'd to watch ower her, and be her help, if need war. And the need came."

She pushed the grey hair back behind her ears again, and struggled with her breath. I leaned forwards with eager interest for the next words; my wife, as if fearful of me still, clasped her hands upon my arm. Vaughan turned his face away from us, and looked fixedly at the opposite wall, a man powerless to act.

"I saw the danger theecken round the braw wife, but she did na luv me, and believed me her husband's spy; I cudna undeceive her wi'oot betrayin' mysel' to him, and I wark'd on in my ain wa', and kep my watch. She lo'ed that mon—her ane unhappiness war to see how soon his passion passed awa' frae her, when he war left a puir mon by his sister's marriage. Then the temptation cam to him to try for the money in anither fashion—and then I kenn'd that the wife's life war in mortal danger. I watch'd on then—I heerd the lees he told his wife aboot Wenford bein' his creditor to a large amoont, and how necessary it war to pay him coort, and humour him. That war the first step—what the ithers war I need na say, but step by step, to murder he went on, thinking not of the watch I kep for that puir girl's sak'. She guessed half o' the truth at last—mayhap mair than half—and becam gallied aboot her future, jealous, as war natural eno', aboot Miss Ray, to whom that man spak false aboot his wife, pavin' the wa for the last blow. Well, the blow cam at last, and I war waitin' for it. Ye remember the nicht of the ball that tuk place in this hoose?"

"Well," I gasped, "go on."

Vaughan rose, and turned his white face towards us.

"Why need I stop here?—why am I compelled to hear this story? Let me go home—I promise you that I will wait you there."

"Ye ha' better stap, sir," said Janet, earnestly; "there is muckle to do yet—yer signature is required to ane or twa documents—ye ha' a promees or twa to mak afore ye leave us."

"I am a prisoner," he said, sitting down again.

"I am here to speer far mercy far ye."

"You?—a murderess!"

Janet struggled with her breath at this retort; the effect produced by it appeared to restore Vaughan somewhat to himself, to suggest perhaps a loophole for escape.

"All that this woman has to say is beyond confirmation," he said; "she makes a charge against me, to screen herself—mark that!"

"I will mak' the charge for a' that—these here wull listen to yer defence, and judge atween the twa. Ye hae forgotten somethin', Mr. Vaughan—a forged letter for instance."

He did not answer. The flash of spirit had died out, or the gleam of hope that, for a moment, had deceived him, was shut away from his darkened life again.

"The ball tuke place, and afore that ball—twa hoors afore—my maister and his wife talked long and secretly thegither. He tald her then that he war a ruined mon, and must fly the country—he confessed to haein' forged Wenford's name, which war na true—and o' the necessity that existed for them baith to become the best o' freends to him, as he at least war wholly in Wenford's power. Then he told her that they must baith secretly leave Nettlewood thegither, and when ance in safety ask Maister Wenford's mercy. He tald her that the marning war too late, that a' would be foond oot, and that by some means unguessed at, they mun be in a place o' safety befair daylight. His wife dooted a' this, but he hae the gift o' arnestness, and she war at last conveenced—or half-conveenced. Howe'er muckle she dooted him, she did na believe that he envied her her leef. That nicht, after the ball, Herbert and his wife crassed the lake by the private boat, and ganged by the Black Gap Pass to Borrowdale. Fearing that the end war coomin', and that life war at stake, I creepit oot o' the hoose, and made for the ferry-boat, with which I crassed lower doon the lake. They war some distance befair me, and I toiled hard to gain upo' them, and hear their footsteps in the Gap—to pray, as I ne'er prayed afore or sance—that I had meesjudged him, and that ne ha' not murder in his thochts. Then—then the scream of ane in distress cam', and I felt that I war too late to be o' help at last. I ran on, prayin' to my God for help—I cud do naethin' else—the scream war half a mile awa', doon the descent o' the Gap into Engerdale. When I reached the tap, the moon bruk oot, and lit oop the mountain side—half wa

doon I saw the feegure of a woman who had got awa' frae the grip o' her murderer, fleein' doon the path pursued by—*him!*”

“A lie!” cried Vaughan.

“I swar to this—mair, I swar to the woman wha kenned the path better than he, gaining groond, and the pistol which I had held in my hand, to fire at him, if it were necessary, I put back in my pocket. At the same instant, he fired at her, and she fell face forwards doon the cliff! The moon went in again, and a' war dim and dark, as I grouped my wa' towards the murderer and his victim. I foond them—I cam' upon them like a speerit—he war bending over her, lying sae silent at his feet.”

“Go on,” I whispered, eagerly.

“He war sair scared at my presence there—he went doon upo' his knees afore me, and begged me keep his secret, told me how he had been tempted on to this—how false she had been to him since her marriage. With blude upo' his hands—the moon came oot again, and I saw it there, dark and shinin'—he stood and leed his wa' to an excuse for the awfu' deed committed; he tald me o' my auld luv for him, our lang connection, and how it war in my ain hands to save his life or hang him. And I sided wi' him, and agreed to help him to bury his wife in the sheep-fold lying oot o' the track at the head of Engerdale Vale. I sided wi' him for my leef's sak', I sided wi' him for the sak' of the victim we carried doon the steep thegither—fording the river, and passing on to the ruined sheep-fold, where a' war awfu' darkness. Then we talked thegither, and he, whose narves had been strung to do this deed, gave wa' and war anxious to be gane. He sat doon on the rock, that had fallen through the roof, and sat and sheevered wi' his face awa' frae her upo' the groond—he owned at last that he could do nae mair to help me. I kenned that part of this war actin', to mak' me his accomplice, or put, at some future day, the bluidy deed upo' me—but the fear or the acting, I thanked my God for then. I war anxious to be alane wi' the body, and I toold him that if he would leave it to me, I had the strength to bury it. I war a po'erful woman, and I war aware o' a quarryman's shed half a mile doon the Vale, where tools war kep that wad be o' service to me; I took it a' upo' my ain hands, and he thanked me, promeessed me gowld for my services, and hurried awa' doon the Vale, where we foond the shed, and tuke frae it a spade and pick. Then he left me, he thanking me for a' my services and promeessing to wait for me to tak' me hame in his boat—which he did—I to hasten back to the sheep-fold where I left the body.

“Janet you are guilty by your own confession,” said Vaughan, his face lighting up again; “you have been tracked by Joseph Gear, and would now implicate me in a crime which you cannot shake off by any means in your power. I have heard all—now hear my story.”

“Ane moment mair,” said Janet, quickly; “I hae na doon yet—

whilst you hae been schemin' to elude me, my proofs hae been getting awfu' strang. At eleven o' the clock, there wull be a witness on the auld nurse's side.

A time-piece, in a black marble case, struck eleven as she spoke, and instinctively we all turned towards the door, which opened as we looked. Three women entered, one of whom came swiftly towards me, and flung her arms round my neck, as I started up with a wild cry.

"NELLIE!"

"—The witness in her own defence—who has been bidding her time, and gaining strength for this day. Herbert Vaughan, do you believe in one risen from the dead?"

He buried his face in his arms and fell forwards on the library table, hiding his looks of horror and guilt from all of us. He gave up then for ever!

CHAPTER XL

SPELL-BOUND.

"Not dead! Living and breathing in the midst of us, and giving hope of better days in store for all. Oh! Ellen, I did not dream of such a happy termination of this mystery."

"Not you, 'Patience Gear!'"

"I had long since outlived all patience at your own hard fate. So cruel and undeserved as it seemed!"

"You are here to make the fate less stern for me—to take my part against that man?"

"If it be necessary—you do not fear him now?"

"No."

Her arms relaxed their hold, she stooped and kissed my wife, and then went on to Janet's side and laid her hand upon her arm.

"Faithful friend, whom in the past I misjudged so much, and to whom I owe my life—let me finish the story which in its relation has tried you so acutely."

"I hae tuld them a'—the rest be easy to guess at."

"No one can guess all your love and faithful service. A few words and then to other matters, Janet."

Janet sat down, leaned her forehead on her hand and groaned. All this had been a trial to her indeed. Of her own free will she had struck at the idol she had loved so long.

"My husband shot me in the shoulder, but I feigned death, and in his excitement he was deceived. When Janet appeared I gave all up for lost, for she, bending over me discovered that I lived. My heart leaped for joy when I felt the pressure of her hand—the reassuring hope that I was with a friend. They carried me to the sheep-fold, where they left me, Janet finding an opportunity to whisper 'Courage!' When she returned I had succeeded in stanching the blood, although the wound continued very painful. Janet bandaged it for me, and assisted me down the Vale, intending to stop at the first quarryman's cottage we could find—but long before the day broke, we met with a man proceeding with his cart towards the Pass beyond the Gap, and which led on to the quarry. The man was a stranger to Engerdale, and knew us not—for a sum of money he agreed to drive me to the foot of the Vale, where the stage coach passes early in the afternoon. Here I parted with Janet for awhile, enjoining her to secrecy, and promising to remain silent as the grave concerning all the horrors of that night. It was arranged between us that Vaughan was to believe me dead, and I, still in the dark concerning the purpose that could have led him to attempt my life, resolved to keep silence until his future acts betrayed him—and it was time to thwart his further plotting. I went to London, where I remained hidden—where I was supported by money sent by Janet, whence I watched the progress of the Divorce Case, and biding my time to baffle him—where I gathered strength slowly to defend myself. For some months I lay ill of my wound, nursed by strangers, even looked upon with suspicion by them, encouraged only by Janet writing to me now and then—begging me to remain concealed a little longer for her master's sake, who would repent some day—she was sure he would, she wrote! There, in the last few days, Janet joined me, hopeless of her master now, and told me the story of how she had begged him on her knees to give up his purposed marriage—to relinquish his design of obtaining a divorce. She gave him up at last and sided with me wholly. It was at my request that Janet came to your apartments in the New Road, Canute—I had heard of your mental excitement, and the effect that it was having on you. To discover myself then, I feared, might prove dangerous to you—therefore it was Janet's intention to break the truth to your wife, when you arrived to thwart her. I had gone back to Nettlewood then, to end all—to bring that man back from London to face the evil he had conjured up around him—and Janet's ill-success was not known to me until I learned it from her own lips here in Nettlewood. Then it was too late, there was no time to spare, and Joseph, who had followed on a false track concerning Janet, had to be taken into our confidence and consulted as to this step."

A long silence followed this explanation. Vaughan retained his inflexible position; we sat grouped at the farther end of the table,

my mother stood at the back of us; whilst close against the door, watchful of all, and looking strangely mournful at all before her, stood Letty Ray, the woman who had vowed to love him to the last. Outside, beyond the large bow window that gave light to the room, we could see the hurrying glancing rain, the background of leaden sky, growing more dense and dark with every instant—a day befitting the terrible story of man's cupidity and baseness.

"Herbert Vaughan, do you wish to ask a question of me?"

"No," he murmured.

"Do you expect mercy from me?—your injured wife—the woman who loved you with all a girl's passionate attachment, until the villain followed the lover whom you feigned so well?"

He did not answer.

"Herbert Vaughan, you will go your way in life, and leave me to my desolate freedom—you will go your way, punished by your own conscience—you will quit England for ever."

"I do not understand," he said, leaning back in his chair, and looking askance at her.

"A deed of separation has been drawn up by my solicitors—you have to sign it; you have therein to sign to my innocence, and your own duplicity—and then God make you a better man, and not give you up as I do."

"And after that?"

"You will leave England—it is my wish; the only condition of my forgiveness of your treachery towards me. Canute," turning to me, "you will not thwart me in these intentions—it is my promise to Janet—it is my own desire that this man should have time before him to repent."

"He will never repent."

"Still—let him go. It is not justice; but, oh! brother, it is forgiveness—a woman's forgiveness for all his evil conduct."

"Ellen—in your heart rests there anything of the old love—the old strange fascination that was akin to magic—for that villain there?"

"Nothing but horror of him."

"Let him go, then—let him vanish away to the darkness, now and for ever."

"Where is the deed?" he asked.

Ellen produced it; he ran his eyes hurriedly over it, then signed it, and rose with steps that tottered very much.

"I—I will go now. I must have air."

"Alone on your journey for ever—alone with the consciousness of evil—try to pray for a new heart and better life," said Ellen.

"Na, not alane," said Janet, moving towards him; "if he wull begin life a deefereent mon, and trust in me to be faithful to him still. Mr. Vaughan, will ye think that I did a' for the best, and tried hard to save your sool? Will ye let me dee in serving ye, and

be the ane servant true to ye, where'er ye may gang? I will ha' hope and faith in ye again—the wee bairn I nursed in your puir mither's time."

"I will go my way alone—I am tired of spies! I am sick of life!"

He walked on with the same tottering steps to the door, putting a hand forward to keep his sister back, who would have sprung to him to assure him also of her own forgiveness. Further still, at the door itself, where the woman he had hoped to marry was standing watching all this, grave and stern.

"All this for your sake," he said passing out.

She made no movement to stop him; she stepped aside, and stood with her hands clasped rigidly together, long after his feet had ceased to echo along the marble passage, after the door had closed heavily behind him, and he had gone on in the rain and mist to his solitary home, a home even deserted by the servants, to whom he had sent down orders to leave the week preceding—the week wherein he had been exultant and successful.

Ellen was standing near Janet, leaning over her, and endeavouring to console her, when Mary quitted my side to add also her consolation to one who sat there bowed down by the trials of that day. I turned to Miss Ray, who did not look up as I approached her.

"Letty, all this has happened for the best."

"They say so," was the bitter answer.

"Surely you do not feel aggrieved at the turn affairs have taken? It is rather your place to thank God for your escape."

"I am glad that I have been all my life mistaken in your sister—I am sorry I have no excuse to offer for my own folly—I acknowledge that all that has happened he has deserved, and that you have been more than merciful—but I am not thankful for all this."

"Why not?"

"It is the beginning of my misery—for ever after this, a desolate and benighted life for me!"

"This is morbid folly. Any girl of honest principle would feel rejoiced that her steps had been arrested before the hour was too late. Letty, you *will* feel glad when you have time to think of this more calmly."

"You have heard your sister speak of her past love for Herbert Vaughan. It was an infatuation, a madness, irreconcilable with the passion of these latter days. I cannot drive my love out of my heart because he is unworthy of it—I have loved him too long and truly to do that!"

"But——"

"Mr. Gear, I will hear no more. He is the craftiest of villains; he is a coward, who has begrudged a woman's life, and plotted to destroy it, but—I love him still!"

"This is incomprehensible!"

"He is poor, humiliated, and alone in the world. He passes from his house to ruin, and there will be no friend to teach him how to begin life anew, with a heart purified and chastened by this trial. Forgive me—think the worst of me—but I must go!"

"There is a spell upon you."

"I must go!" she whispered, in a low earnest tone, that thrilled me. "Whatever happens, I must go to him!"

With her hands clasped together she went slowly from the room towards the hall—like a woman whose brain had been turned by the misfortunes besetting her. Whether she were mad or sane at that time, I have ever doubted—and it has been beyond my power to solve since.

I looked round. They had not noticed her departure; they were talking earnestly to Janet still—my mother had left her place, and joined them with my child in her arms—Joseph alone was glinting at me from the corners of his eyes. I followed Letty, whom I found with her hand on the lock of the great outer door.

"Pardon me, Miss Ray—but where are you going?"

"To him."

"This is sheer madness."

"I cannot help it—I am called to him—there is no power to stop me—there is no one here who has the right to say me nay."

"I have the moral right at least."

"No!" she cried, impetuously.

"You are going to your fate—to shame—to ruin!"

"Do you not know me better than that?" she cried haughtily. "Have I ever proved myself so weak and erring as to be led to shame at this hour? No, Mr. Gear, I am going to help him—to be his friend—to follow his fortunes—to be ever at his side—to bid him be strong and resist temptation, when the evil hour comes back to him. Alone in the world, he will fall—with me, I see a brighter and a better life for him."

"Stay and reflect awhile—why this haste?"

"I saw an awful purpose in his face—he will go back to that house, conscious that all hope is past with him, and then—oh, my God!—the razor flashing in his hands. Mr. Gear, I must go!"

She flung back the door with a noise that shook the house—she went bare-headed, and like a madwoman, in the rain. At the last step she paused, and looked back at me.

"I said that I would love him all my life—God be my witness to that promise still. Mr. Gear, don't follow me—surely I possess the right to seek my own fate. Like him, I am friendless and alone."

"Miss Ray, I beg you to pause. I warn you that no good can follow this."

"I am past all warning—I am resolved."

"God help you, then!"

She went on through the rain, and I watched her hurry along the carriage drive, drawn by the spell which bound her to that man, and which no revelation of his utter baseness could affect. At the great swing gate she turned and looked back at me—it was the face of a despairing woman that was turned to me. It shaped my course of action—it led me at all risks, to attempt to stay her progress.

I snatched at my hat from the tree in the hall, and went out after her—she detected the movement, and fled on down the country-road.

I followed down the steps, feeling conscious, for the first time, that my strength was not what it had been—that the past excitement, the long sleepless hours, had rendered me very weak at last.

Half-way down the drive my brother Joseph joined me.

“Where are you going?”

“To stop Letty. She is going to her fate.”

“Let her go—she is a fool. I always hated that woman.”

“She is worth a hundred Herbert Vaughans—a generous and unselfish woman, whom I will not see sacrificed.”

“As you will. Let us go on together, then.”

“I will enter the house, and take her from his arms, if he dare to claim her as his friend. If he brave me at the last, I will not spare him even now.”

“I never intended to spare him,” said Joseph, drily.

“What do you mean?”



CHAPTER XII.

DIEU DISPOSE.

LETTY ran on through the rain at a pace there was no overtaking. By no earthly means was it possible to intercept her progress before she reached Nettlewood House.

I gave up the attempt to pursue her, but continued my way, walking as rapidly as my strength would allow, and outwalking Joseph even in that weakness which I felt was gaining ground upon me.

“Joseph, there is a long illness before me,” I said.

“I hope not, Canute,” he said, earnestly. “I think that this is only the fatigue occasioned by your journey.”

“No—I shall be ill.”

“What do you come out in the rain for?”

"To save that girl, worthy of a better fate."

"You think of entering the house—at once?"

"I must."

"There's no occasion—he cannot escape—there are officers watching him, and waiting my directions. I have arranged all."

"That man must go free—if it be Ellen's wish."

"The laws cannot be outraged," said my brother; "he has committed a great crime, and Ellen will be compelled to prosecute."

"This shall not be."

"Eh?"

Joseph ever disliked my firmness, and was impressed by it.

"I say that this shall not be! Let him go his way, as Ellen wished, but let us save that girl from the consequences of her own mad act. He will resign her, I think."

"I will compel him," said Joseph; "unless he resign her, and by some means or other pay me the debt he owes me, I will not spare him. I have not schemed all this while to be robbed of my money as well as foiled of my revenge."

"He has not the money."

"He will procure it—he shall. If she be so fond of this man, she will write me a cheque to save him."

"No—I will not have that!"

"Well, well," adopting a conciliatory tone, "leave it to me. I will call on him at once."

We were close on Nettlewood House—Letty Ray had long since passed through the gates towards it. As we approached, a man's head appeared over the fence that divided the lower ground from the lake.

"I thought it was you, sir."

"Where is he?"

"In the house—a lady has just run in, I think to put him on his guard."

"Who is in the house?"

"One servant—he is in our pay, and keeps a watch upon him for us. Say the word as soon as you like, sir,—it is very cold work out here in the rain."

"I am going into the house—if the servant opens the street door, come at once."

"All right, sir."

"I accompany you," I said to my brother; "I will have no treachery. Together, or I go alone."

Joseph hesitated—and twitched his ear nervously.

"I suppose you must," he said, with a sigh, "but upon my soul it is uncommonly hard, after all my trouble. Canute, you will not try to balk me out of my just rights?"

"No—but we must not *sell* that man his liberty."

"As quick as you can, sir," suggested the man, shuddering

violently. "I don't like this part of the world at all. It gives me the horrors."

"How is that?" I asked.

"It rains so awfully hard that the very ground shakes under your feet. There now!"

I clutched the arm of my brother, for the earth vibrated—*shuddered*.

"Did you feel that?—or am I worse in health than I believe?"

"It is strange," said Joseph, thoughtfully. "It could not be fancy, and they don't have earthquakes in Cumberland."

A man, bare-headed, came running from the house—when he saw us he flung up his arms in horror. The man on watch leaped over the fence with an oath.

"I can't stop here—there's something awful coming."

"I must have my money," said Joseph.

"Back!—back for your life!" I shouted. "*The world is at an end!* My God! Look at the mountain!"

It was coming towards us! The great mountain behind the house at Nettlewood was sliding forward—the house was slowly moving on—the land shook, as with an earthquake—there was a crashing of trees, a noise of falling stones, and then the whole scene changed, and suddenly and awfully the house rocked and collapsed.

We stood horror-stricken, gazing at this scene; it was not to be realized on the instant, but to seem part of a wild dream for many a long day. Nettlewood House had gone forward with the landslip, and then broken up for ever.

* * * * *

I knew no more for many weeks. The illness that had been threatening me so long, came upon me then, and my brother and the two men carried me back to Miss Ray's house, a helpless infant, without power to move a limb.

When I was well enough to be conscious of the care that had been taken of me—to know the face of the dear faithful wife who had never left me during my long illness—of my sister and mother's, of Joseph's—strangely altered, and full of a new earnestness—they spoke to me, cautiously at first, of the landslip that had brought half the geologists in the world to Nettlewood. Of the theories respecting it they told me nothing; or of the prophecies that one learned man had made years ago respecting that particular substratum on which the mountain was based—or of the convictions of many that the incessant rains had sapped at the spongy base until it had given way and brought the mountain shelving to the lake. They spoke only of the search for the two victims to the catastrophe—of their discovery, and burial in Henlock Churchyard—of the strange end to those two lives—a life of cautious crime, which spared no one in its course—and a life shadowed by a passion that turned to madness, and drove its victim to her death. A deep and earnest passion for an object

utterly unworthy of it—one of those strange idolatries which shock the world of simple and pure-minded people, and are so hard to understand.

Poor Ellen understood it—for she had experienced the strange power which this Herbert Vaughan could exercise over women—she had suffered, and been scathed by it. *Her* ransom came too late for happiness.

Oh! for a less number of poor suffering women hurrying to their fate by spells incomprehensible to us! The temptation a mystery, but the sad result staring us in the face with each week's news, and shocking us in our streets by the sin and sorrow ever flitting by.

Letty's passion was akin to this—but not this! Let us leave it in its incomprehensibility, and dwell for a short while on the fortune she had left behind her—the fortune which had been schemed for, struggled for so long.

Letty Ray had left a will behind her, bequeathing her property to Herbert Vaughan. He had been her one thought all her life—she had feared for that life before leaving London, and executed a will, leaving Zitman's money to her lover—failing him, before her marriage, to Mary Gear, late Mary Zitman, of Nettlewood House.

So the money came round again by a strange chance; but it was money which we were superstitious concerning—which we put by for our children's future, and cared not to touch ourselves—which seemed to us ever shadowed by the darkest of reminiscences.

When our children grow up and require starting in the world, we may think of Letty Ray's fortune—when Edmund Wenford, a nervous invalid still, but a man strangely altered and subdued, requires assistance to begin life anew, we may draw upon it—when any of us are in want, or Ellen needs a wedding dowry—she is a grave-faced woman, who will never marry again, I fear—when there is distress in the land, and we feel that we have the power to assist the helpless.

We are happy in our quiet way—the partnership with Mr. Sander-son is a success—children cluster round our knees, and there is a true love in our midst, that hallows home, and renders it a resting-place worth seeking from the world.

My mother and Ellen are living near us still—Joseph has opened business in London, and is a better and less covetous man—Janet is with us, our children's nurse and faithful friend. She has learned to love those children as she loved Mary and her brother in the times before the troubles came.

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